

Why We Are Optimistic about Kindergarten English Language Arts Common Core Writing Standards and the Every Child Succeeds Act

By Nellie Edge

If kindergarten children in Title I Schools can write like this, just imagine how they will write as 3rd graders!

Our Logo



We designed this CCSS logo to reflect our vision of implementing Common Core State Standards within a framework of:

- Joyful, meaning-centered learning—rich in music, drama, Sign Language, and the arts
- An understanding that kindergarten learning is active and social
- Strong and respectful “Parents as Partners” connections
- A concern for the physical and emotional wellbeing of children and a commitment to imparting positive learning attitudes and beliefs that will help each child do well in school—and in life.

As educators we can choose to spoon-feed our children or we can develop self-regulated learners who are motivated to do quality work. We can choose to create a joyful learning community where kindness, responsibility, and caring are intrinsic parts of the learning process. Years later, children will carry the memories of splendid teachers who believed in them and taught them to work hard to reach their goals, teachers who instilled a passion for learning through wise, playful, and loving relationships. Respectful and supportive family connections and a curriculum that celebrates the arts, honors childhood learning, and provides authentic learning are the foundation for The Every Child Succeeds Act (ECSA) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

We Value Clear Learning Outcomes and Meaning-Centered Curriculum

Implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for writing produced a broader, more meaning-centered literacy curriculum; weaving the arts into deep science explorations and thoughtful engagement in high quality literature and nonfiction. Thus we built an intrinsic motivation for children to learn. **We value the emphasis on learning outcomes** rather than the very simplistic one-size-fits-all solutions that have dominated literacy instruction in some of our state schools. **We are pleased with an integrated literacy model that incorporates reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We believe educators can teach these core skills within a learning community that values creativity, self-regulation, collaboration, and voice.** For all of these reasons, we view these standards as needed guideposts and value the freedom to implement them with our best teaching wisdom; providing all children the Talented and Gifted (TAG) curriculum framework they deserve.

These core standards are consistent with the full-day Quality Kindergarten Model our colleagues have developed and will continue to enhance. **We see learning as an integrated, interdisciplinary process** rather than a series of isolated subjects or skill development activities. Our aim has always been to create deep, authentic, engaging curriculum because all children benefit from rigorous—and joyful—learning.

Parents Deserve to Know What Rigorous Standards Look Like

CCSS is a valuable tool for parents. They deserve to know what a normal progression of writing development looks like, where their children fit in as beginning writers, and what knowledge and skills they will need to become **proficient**. We believe respectful and supportive “Parents as Partners” connections multiply our teaching effectiveness and are some of the most important contributions

kindergarten teachers make to our school communities. As we help families establish the nightly commitment to “sing, talk, and read” with their children, we are laying the foundation for long-term school success. Meaningful parent involvement is vital if all children are to be offered the opportunity to thrive with high academic standards.

We Know How to Grow Engaged and Purposeful Writers

We are pleased to see writing is finally getting the emphasis that wise kindergarten teachers have always known it should receive. We have learned that the best way to grow engaged writers is to give children authentic writing-to-read experiences right from the start; to grow as writers, children need to be engaged in real-world writing with a purpose. **We value the recognition that skilled kindergarten teachers are intentionally developing these reading and writing skills across disciplines throughout the day.**

We know how to build authentic and motivating writing experiences that children love: making lists, writing messages, learning to draw and making their own books. We honor “kid writing” while encouraging children to develop a core of words and sentences they can fluently write, spell, and read! We teach children to use phonics-based spelling in their “kid writing” to develop strong sound-symbol connections. At the same time we begin introducing high-frequency “heart word sentences” in a multisensory, motivating way so that children are continually challenging themselves to reach the next level of mastery. Our approach provides high-quality “parallel activities” for students who are able to reach mastery of writing fundamentals with less practice and repetition. These children are reading, writing and illustrating more sophisticated messages, stories and books, and choosing online research projects to pursue at home and share with their classmates. They are reading delightful songs, poems, and rhymes which they have personalized through illustration from the first week of school. These “I Can Read” Anthology Notebooks become family treasures.

We Systematically and Actively Build Voracious Vocabulary

We are also pleased to see the emphasis on rich vocabulary development, which we call our “voracious vocabulary learning!” We intentionally and systematically build future S.A.T. vocabulary in ways that playfully engage the heart and mind of the young child. One of our mottos is “Language play every day... Books and songs all day long!” We develop a sense of excitement about words and the sounds of language. Our consistent focus on voracious vocabulary development is a source of challenge and delight: Children see themselves as “**prolific writers**” and “**voracious readers**” who are excited about big, rich words. They enjoy being **veterinarians** in our literacy play centers, **meteorologists** announcing the weather, and **collectors** of new color words like “amber”, “maroon”, or “chartreuse”. They sing about oviparous animals, carnivores, and echolocation. They proudly announce, “That’s another alliterative title!”

Children Learn to Read, Choose to Read, and Love to Read!

Our children are all engaged in supportive shared, guided, and independent reading experiences—right from the start. They make personal connections with books and expect these books to make sense. We give them books that are worthy of being read and reread, thus engaging them in authentic literacy from the first month of school. While recognizing the importance of Multisensory ABC and Phonics Immersion and building mastery of foundational letter recognition and phonics skills, we applaud the beliefs embedded in the CCSS document that our children’s first experience with text should allow them to read real text “so they can begin to make meaning for themselves.” We have proven that the most efficient and delightful way to build “experts” at ABC recognition and phonics skills is through an authentic art-infused approach that includes singing, signing, fingerspelling, and a strong “Parents as Partners” component. This approach is very respectful of English language learners and the diverse

cultural backgrounds that our children bring to kindergarten. We recognize that some children will need additional multisensory scaffolding.

We give children high-quality “Read and Sing” picture books that simultaneously build English language skills and reading fluency; reading familiar songs and rhymes develops children’s cultural understanding and the joy of reading. We search for quality books that include art and language worthy of children. We involve “Parents as Partners” in literacy to build strong literacy foundations with our **Family Read and Sing Book Club** and **Elephant and Piggie Book Club**. These quality books become mentor text that inspire our young authors to write their own books.

We choose flexible literacy materials for differentiated learning. Most of our books are appropriate for even harder-to-accelerate students, as long as tutorial support is offered; each child has a personal connection with the print and has seen him or herself as one who **can** read and **loves** to read. “The aim is for students to understand that thinking and reading occur simultaneously.” We know how to develop readers who **love** books and **choose** to read. In a Quality Kindergarten Model, we provide less-proficient learners with the additional individual and small group support they need to prevent most writing failures. Acknowledging that kindergarten teachers and families are the ones who must build the strong literacy foundation motivates school leaders to begin giving the utmost respect and support for kindergarten teaching—**where high Common Core State Standards begin**. We know how to develop skills and positive learning habits for future grades to build upon.

Children Memorize, Recite, Perform, and Read Poetic Language

We love the inclusion of poetry and rhyme in Common Core State Standards. We weave the memorable language of nursery rhymes, delightful poems and songs with American Sign Language and the arts across the curriculum throughout the day. Children indeed need to memorize, recite, and perform language as a foundation for developing a love of the sounds of language. We are happy to see our fluency focus—“celebrating language”—validated again within the design of these core standards.

Oral language is still the foundation for building thoughtful readers, writers, and communicators. We recognize that oral language fluency precedes reading fluently, yet skilled teaching can *simultaneously* develop both.

All Children Deserve High-Quality Preschool Experiences

As kindergarten teachers, we are committed to nurture and instruct each child who enters our classrooms—and they enter with a four year developmental span. We are especially concerned about children who are still developing the self-regulation skills, fine motor skills, and language foundation needed to build an emotionally and academically solid foundation for academic learning. Most of our schools do not have the option of providing our emotionally younger, less experienced children with another year in a language-intensive, structured, play-based program that focuses on self-regulation skills and a strong, respectful “Parents as Partners” commitment. However, there are quality early childhood models that have proven track records for narrowing the achievement gap during the critical early years. (We refer you to research performed by cognitive neurobiologist Adele Diamond at the University of British Columbia for one such example.) While it is not my intent to address the issues that surround early childhood and poverty, it is most certainly beyond time to provide high-quality early education services for our youngest citizens, especially our most vulnerable.

We are encouraged to see that some states are seriously addressing the issue of high-quality preschool learning. Our young children deserve to learn in environments that reflect an understanding of how the young child learns best. As kindergarten educators, we will continue to reach for the stars with the lives of our children and advocate for quality early childhood experiences that bring those stars a little closer.

We Value Professional Learning Communities

Finally, the Common Core State Standards necessitate a much greater emphasis on ongoing professional development for teachers and time to reflect and share through collaborative learning communities. Our **Kindergarten Cadre** groups led by master kindergarten educators have proved the power of accomplished teachers inspiring and mentoring others in the pursuit of excellence. We must believe that higher standards and expectations for teachers will eventually lead to the elevation of our profession, a more worthy salary for teachers, and—once again—seeing teaching as “the most honorable of professions.” We are cautiously optimistic that the CCSS focus, combined with The Every Child Succeeds Act, will lead to strong mentoring systems for new kindergarten teachers, greater autonomy for accomplished classroom teachers, and systems that support and value great kindergarten teaching!

Great Nations Build Great Public Schools

In countries such as Finland, where excellence in education is highly valued, it is considered a patriotic calling to be a teacher. In the United States, we have a long, important road ahead to **examine the culture of school and revitalize the culture of teacher colleges! How can we support the best instincts of our teachers** in the light of decades of “best practices” research and the latest innovative strategies that take advantage of how the young child’s brain learns best? The kindergarten Common Core English Language Arts Standards, used wisely, can provide a framework which moves the United States forward. In addition, The Every Child Succeeds Act, which returns the arts and parent involvement to their natural place in the early literacy framework, refocuses education of the young as our most pressing national priority. **Great nations build great public schools, and that starts with empowered kindergarten teachers!**

Our goal continues to be “Creating Schools Worthy of Children.”