



Dear School Leader,

This article is intended to help you understand the key elements *Literacy Essentials* and how the elements of the program differ from most other reading/literacy programs.

Program Content

Access Literacy's *Literacy Essentials: The Journey From Spelling to Reading*® teaches children to read by presenting a thorough, explicit, multisensory explanation of the sound-symbol relationship for the spelling patterns of English (phonetics), as well as the rules and consistencies governing their use in English words (orthography). Students who begin the program in kindergarten are taught to spell a word to learn how to read it. The research reveals that children who can spell a word can always read it, but the reverse is not true. Many of us, adult users of English, may be skilled in reading and horrible in spelling.

Therefore, this method begins with teaching children the information they need to spell, explicitly teaching a specific set of new words four days each week. These words are then practiced to achieve automaticity for spelling and ultimately automaticity for reading. From my 25+ years of teaching I am convinced that children perish educationally for lack of information, not because the information is too difficult. This is especially true in spelling and reading. Curriculums used in most schools today do not give children the complete body of information they need to successfully navigate the complexities of the phonetics and orthography (spelling system) of English. Many children come to school with thousands of words they can understand and use when speaking and listening. What they desire, is the ability to as quickly as possible read and write with that set of words. When we give children the information they need to be able to do that, the result is excited, engaged readers who willingly write about the interesting things they are learning.

Once the young children have a set of words they can spell accurately, they begin simple sentence writing. In kindergarten, their early sentence writing is their first reading. During the K-2 years, students are taught basic grammar which supports sentence writing that is used to support reading comprehension. Students are daily writing sentences for the purpose of supporting reading. If students have the knowledge and tools to be able to decode the words in a text, the next barrier to comprehension is often sentence structure. Sentences in texts become longer and more complex as reading levels increase and some students do not have the tools to navigate the sentence. Writing sentences allows students to slow their thinking and create mental space to better understand how the order of words and phrases develop meaning. The goal in K-2 is to have students writing sentences with a level of complexity that will lead them easily into the texts at their reading level.

Literacy Essentials: The Journey From Spelling to Reading® differs from other phonics based programs in several ways. The primary difference is **the order in which literacy skills are taught**. Typically, reading programs start by teaching "sight words." Children are given a list of words that they see repeatedly and are asked to just commit to "visual memory." This is much like you learning

hundreds of phone numbers. In contrast, this approach uses the basic information about English phonetics and orthography to help children code and analyze the spelling and decoding of more than 2000 words between kindergarten and 3rd grade. As the title of the program indicates, the order of teaching is from spelling to reading. The children first learn to **write and say the sounds** of the 72 common English spelling patterns in isolation, so they can then combine them to **spell** words. With the words they are learning to spell, they will be able to write sentences. These sentences become their first **reading**. This process wires children's brains to **think** deeply and analyze how words work individually, in combination to form thoughts and ideas, and creatively to express ideas in a rich, clear manner. Words are powerful and to wield them well allows individuals an appropriate way to influence the world around them.

So, the order of teaching literacy skills is a primary difference, but in tandem with the reordering of skills is the **scope and pace** of "what" is taught. For example, all 72 common English spelling patterns (phonograms) and the basic rules of orthography are introduced by the end of first semester of 1st grade. From that point forward (through 3rd grade), the information introduced is practiced with more than 2,000 words, until it is internalized and can be used by older students to independently learn new vocabulary. Other programs stretch the teaching of a much smaller set of spelling patterns (maybe half the number) over grades K-5 with little or no explanation of rules governing how they are used. Thus, other programs must resort to using visually memorized "sight words" to begin reading and most often memorize spelling words by calling out letter names for spelling. Both sight words and calling out letter names for spelling teach children wrong information about how the English code works.

Literacy Essentials reorders the teaching of literacy skills, increases the breadth of information provided to children, and paces the teaching of those skills to make them available to children early in kindergarten and first grade.

The final significant difference with the *Literacy Essentials* program is **how** the information is taught. Each lesson is *multisensory*. Under the overarching umbrella of multisensory, the lessons use *direct instruction*, with *interactive analysis* and *graphic organization* to teach and practice skills. The skills and information are taught using a *multisensory* approach so that the different areas of the brain that are used in writing and reading are wiring code information simultaneously. As the students are learning the spelling patterns and vocabulary, they "see it, hear it, say it and write it." Each time they learn or practice new vocabulary they will simultaneously engage different neurological areas of the brain and wire them together. Another aspect of the curriculum is *directly instructing through an interactive analysis* that leads the children through the thought processes necessary to understand how each word works. As the students engage in this analysis over the course of more than 2,000 words, their brains develop cognitive categories for analysis that eventually result in student independence in learning new vocabulary. Finally, coming alongside the "write it" piece of multisensory, students are provided a notebook, *My Orthography Notebook*, which is structured to help them *graphically organize* the complicated information they are learning about the English code. As students complete the graphic organizers each year with a new set of words (1st – 3rd), the pages provide practice and serve as a reference when questions arise with new vocabulary.

Spelling Vocabulary

Literacy Essentials explicitly teaches more than 2,000 words in grades K-3. These words would be considered high frequency words which simply means “those words used most often in reading and writing.” There are many different lists of high frequency words that vary in numbers of words. The vocabulary words taught in *Literacy Essentials* have come from several such lists that include the Fry list and the Ayers list. These lists, compiled at various points in history, comprise the most often used words in reading and writing. The term “sight word” is used in current reading programs to mean a group of high frequency words used in all texts that are “supposedly” unable to be sounded out or explained phonetically or orthographically. So, students are asked to simply memorize them like a picture. They look at the letter combinations and commit the picture of the letters to visual memory. This is an unfortunate misnomer and memorizing “sight words” runs counter to the skills needed for spelling and reading. Most of the words on traditional lists of “sight words” are there because the programs are not teaching enough information about the code to explain the spelling and pronunciation of the words. The real crime is that these words are generally taught first, so students begin their introduction to reading with a faulty notion of how reading a word works. The set of words that traditional programs have students memorize by sight are instead, within the *Literacy Essentials* program, taught from spelling to reading like all the vocabulary taught.

After students have learned the more than 2,000 words taught in *Literacy Essentials* between K-3rd grade, it is recommended that 4th – 6th grade teachers select rich vocabulary from literature and content areas (10-12 words per week) which allows students word study to be integrated with the content they are learning. They should introduce and analyze the words for spelling (with an emphasis on morphology), and practice usage. This approach allows the grade-level teacher to integrate their vocabulary instruction with content while continuing to build and use the students’ prior knowledge of orthography learned in K – 3rd.

Teachers

The expectation for teachers new to an Orton-based curriculum is to first and foremost be courageous learners themselves. Unfortunately, in our country, most teachers are not being trained in English orthography and phonetics or the science of reading. This method requires them to study and learn a mountain of new information and reconfigure their paradigm for the teaching of reading. Many teachers have been teaching in a particular way for a number of years and it is scary to “let go” of the familiar to leap to the new and unknown. That was my personal experience as well. However, what I had been teaching prior, was not working for many of my students and I knew that. The first year I used an Orton-based program, 1997, I was dumbfounded by what I saw happening with my students. I did not teach it well my first year because I was still a learner myself. However, what happened in my classroom, even with my beginning knowledge of the program, convinced me that I could never again give students less than what this type of curriculum offered them. And even my faulty teaching that first year produced better results for my children than all the previous years. Teachers need to press into difficult material and be patient with themselves as they slowly improve in teaching this curriculum. I had the privilege of sitting under training at least three times. Each time the information landed on more solid ground in my brain which freed me to then add on more pieces to my instruction. Teachers need to understand that 3-5 years are required to have full command of the information and how to implement it at their grade level with fidelity.