Cultivating Students’ Ability To Read Complex Texts Independently

Another key priority of the Common Core State Standards is a requirement that students be able to demonstrate their independent capacity to read at the appropriate level of complexity and depth.

A. **Scaffolds enable all students to experience rather than avoid the complexity of the text.** Many students will need careful instruction — including effective scaffolding — to enable them to read at the level of text complexity required by the Common Core State Standards. However, the scaffolding should not preempt or replace the text by translating its contents for students or telling students what they are going to learn in advance of reading the text; the scaffolding should not become an alternate, simpler source of information that diminishes the need for students to read the text itself carefully. Effective scaffolding aligned with the standards should result in the reader encountering the text on its own terms, with instructions providing helpful directions that focus students on the text. Follow-up support should guide the reader when encountering places in the text where he or she might struggle. Aligned curriculum materials therefore should explicitly direct students to re-read challenging portions of the text and offer instructors clear guidance about an array of text-based scaffolds. When productive struggle with the text is exhausted, questions rather than explanations can help focus the student’s attention on key phrases and statements in the text or on the organization of ideas in the paragraph.

When necessary, extra textual scaffolding prior to and during the first read should focus on words and concepts that are essential to a basic understanding and that students are not likely to know or be able to determine from context. Supports should be designed to serve a wide range of readers, including those English language learners and other students who are especially challenged by the complex text before them. Texts and the discussion questions should be selected and ordered so that they bootstrap onto each other and promote deep thinking and substantive engagement with the text.

B. **Reading strategies support comprehension of specific texts and the focus on building knowledge and insight.** Close reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities and not be consigned to the margins when completing assignments. Reading strategies should work in the service of reading comprehension (rather than an end unto themselves) and assist students in building knowledge and insight from specific texts. To be effective, instruction on specific reading techniques should occur when they illuminate specific aspects of a text. Students need to build an infrastructure of skills, habits, knowledge, dispositions, and experience that enables them to approach new challenging texts with confidence and stamina. As much as possible, this training should be embedded in the activity of reading the text rather than being taught as a separate body of material. Additionally, care should be taken that introducing broad themes and questions in advance of reading does not prompt overly general conversations rather than focusing reading on the specific ideas and details, drawing evidence from the text, and gleaning meaning and knowledge from it.
C. **Design for whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction cultivates student responsibility and independence.** It is essential that questions, tasks, and activities be designed to ensure that all students are actively engaged in reading. Materials should provide opportunities for students to participate in real, substantive discussions that require them to respond directly to the ideas of their peers. Teachers can begin by asking the kind and level of questions appropriate to the reading and then students should be prompted to ask high-quality questions about what they are reading to one another for further comprehension and analysis. Writing about text is also an effective way to elicit this active engagement. Students should have opportunities to use writing to clarify, examine, and organize their own thinking, so reading materials should provide effective ongoing prompts for students to analyze texts in writing. Instructional materials should be designed to devote sufficient time in class to students encountering text without scaffolding, as they often will in college- and career-ready environments. A significant portion of the time spent with each text should provide opportunities for students to work independently on analyzing grade-level text because this independent analysis is required by the standards.

D. **Questions and tasks require careful comprehension of the text before asking for further evaluation or interpretation.** The Common Core State Standards call for students to demonstrate a careful understanding of what they read before engaging their opinions, appraisals, or interpretations. Aligned materials should therefore require students to demonstrate that they have followed the details and logic of an author’s argument before they are asked to evaluate the thesis or compare the thesis to others. When engaging in critique, materials should require students to return to the text to check the quality and accuracy of their evaluations and interpretations. Often, curricula surrounding texts leap too quickly into broad and wide-open questions of interpretation before cultivating command of the details and specific ideas in the text.

E. **Materials make the text the focus of instruction by avoiding features that distract from the text.** Teachers’ guides or students’ editions of curriculum materials should highlight the reading selections. Everything included in the surrounding materials should be thoughtfully considered and justified before being included. The text should be central, and surrounding materials should be included only when necessary, so as not to distract from the text itself. Instructional support materials should focus on questions that engage students in becoming interested in the text. Rather than being consigned to the margins when completing assignments, close and careful reading should be at the center of classroom activities. Given the focus of the Common Core State Standards, publishers should be extremely sparing in offering activities that are not text based. Existing curricula will need to be revised substantially to focus classroom time on students and teachers practicing reading, writing, speaking, and listening in direct response to high-quality text.

F. **Materials offer assessment opportunities that genuinely measure progress.** Aligned materials should guide teachers to provide scaffolding but also gradually remove those supports by including tasks that require students to demonstrate their independent capacity to read and write in every domain at the appropriate level of complexity and sophistication. Activities used for assessment should clearly denote what standards and texts are being emphasized, and materials should offer frequent and easily implemented assessments, including systems for record keeping and follow-up.