



# STRATEGIES TO BUILD KNOWLEDGE

**How to implement an ELA program that fosters deep learning  
and builds a knowledge foundation.**

In the standards-driven K-12 environment, it's easy to get distracted from the knowledge that's required to develop and demonstrate the skills students must master.

"The Common Core State Standards are all skills-based; there's no content in the Common Core," explains Dawn Smith, principal of Benjamin Franklin Elementary in Riverside, Calif.

A [Center for Education Policy Research](#) study found that 72% of English language-arts teachers have changed at least half of their instructional content to focus on standards. More than three-quarters (80%) of these educators used materials

they created or content from other teachers in their schools and the miscellany of online sources. Despite teachers' best efforts, it's impossible to know if that content is well-sequenced, aligned to standards and optimized for knowledge building.

Even more troubling, a [Chiefs of Change report](#) notes that "such changes have not led to an inevitable rise in the quality of those materials or of classroom instruction," and unless policies emerge that "address the content and quality of curriculum and instructional materials, any positive effects on student learning from more rigorous standards are blunted."

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That's why districts and schools are rapidly adopting curricula focused on building background knowledge—day by day and over the long term—to boost:

- **Reading comprehension.** Using existing background knowledge—as opposed to a large repertoire of reading strategies—is the best way for students to understand texts, respond to questions and to think critically, a necessary element of close reading. “The more real-world knowledge we can give our students, the more proficient readers they become,” says Blake Clark, a literacy and instructional coach at Three Peaks Elementary in Cedar City, Utah.
- **Engagement.** Students naturally engage more deeply with information that is relevant and meaningful to them. “Sometimes, themes are artificial in ELA curricula, or too general,” Smith says. More complex ELA content piques students’ interest and prompts inquiry so they learn new information more naturally by linking it to what they’ve already learned—just as the brain stores new information by associating it with known information. “They see the connection and that sticks—that’s what’s engaging.

This is important because the skills don't transfer without engagement.”

- **Equity.** “When students come from many different backgrounds and experiences, building background knowledge [in the classroom] is crucial to level the playing field,” notes Ashley Peterson, a fourth-grade teacher and former ESL aide at Enoch Elementary in Enoch, Utah. Content-rich ELA instruction helps set all students on track for success in future endeavors, she asserts. “Every student has the right to an education that will help them achieve more in a college or career setting,” says Peterson.

## BEST PRACTICES

Smith, Clark and Peterson offer these tips for adopting and implementing a content-rich ELA curriculum:

**Take the long view.** Leaders must help teachers understand their impact beyond an individual lesson or grade level, Smith notes. Show educators how the content they teach now drives students’ success later in the year, and how what they teach in their grade directly influences what students can learn in subsequent ones.

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**Build school culture.** Successful adoption of a content-rich ELA curriculum requires a culture that embraces growth. “The staff has to be devoted because it’s going to task them for the first year or so,” says Smith, who supervised her school’s ELA Core Knowledge adoption. Smith works closely with her team to create a consensus about what’s instructionally important and what’s not. “When I meet with my teams, I emphasize the must-dos, the must-teaches,” she explains. “It helps teachers see what they can let go of so the right stuff is in there.” This tactic is effective when designing lesson plans or choosing an ELA curriculum.

**Collaborate on a school-wide plan.** Work with content-area teachers in the same grade to align content across classrooms. If students are reading texts on astronomy in ELA, consider a cross-classroom project that brings together ELA, science and art, such as building solar system models.

“In our elementary schools, teachers come together weekly as grade levels and discuss goals set for their students that are aligned with the CCSS,” Peterson explains. “An effective PLC can help the best teachers get even better and bring strength to everyone on the team that they wouldn’t have alone.”

Blake concurs. “It is much easier to teach a curriculum that is tied together and aligned when the grade level team that is teaching it is tied together and aligned,” he says.

**Assign complex, real-world content—daily.** Curriculum should include challenging content and help students make connections to their everyday world, Peterson says. Immerse students in a domain for 3-4 weeks at a time and make sure that their daily speaking, listening, writing and reading are grounded in the content. “When we use complex ideas and information to help the kids dig deeper into their own world, they will get so much more out of their education,” says Peterson. “The engagement is key!”

**Bring content to life.** A sequenced curriculum supports deeper knowledge acquisition, over the long term, which creates more opportunities for learning. “In fourth grade, Unit 2 students read

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about the Middle Ages and the weaponry that was used during this time period,” Clark says. His class made catapults from rubber bands, paper cups and spoons to show the simplicity of the weapons of the day. “By integrating engineering into this topic, the students were able to take new information and mix it with their prior knowledge to better understand the complex piece of text that was laying in front of them.”

**Specify content objectives.** A knowledge-rich curriculum should identify the important information students need to learn over multiple grades in areas such as social studies, science, literature and the arts. Starting with the earliest

grade level, decide what knowledge students should learn in a given topic then write content objectives in measurable, observable terms. Continue building on those objectives, increasing knowledge and expectations at each subsequent grade level.

Another idea: Begin at the end. Start with a knowledge goal for the final grade level and work backward to identify prerequisites at each previous grade level. Be specific about the content students will learn. For instance, see what content will give students an advantage in middle school. Or, perhaps, look at the topics that appear on assessments and build from there.

## Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts®

Amplify CKLA™ builds background knowledge and foundational skills. Lessons are delivered via two instructional strands in K-2—a Knowledge Strand and a Skills Strand—that integrate into a single strand for grades 3-5.

It features a systematic approach to developing decoding and other critical foundational reading skills, and builds vocabulary and comprehension by developing carefully sequenced cross-curricular background knowledge in social studies, science, literature and the arts.

“We have loved using CKLA and continue to see the great strengths that come from this

quality program,” says Blake Clark, a literacy and instructional coach at Three Peaks Elementary in Cedar City, Utah. In addition to reading comprehension gains, the curriculum supports learning in other content areas. “CKLA lends itself to many STEM-centered activities because of the richness of content,” he says.

The overall benefit is clear, Clark says. “CKLA focuses on current research and makes sure that what is being taught will benefit the student for their life, not just for the specific grade.”

Learn more about Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts [online](#). ■



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**Be on your game.** Students who receive well-sequenced, multifaceted instruction tend to learn more and, according to Clark, educators feel more like they're actually educating in a knowledge-building curriculum with rich content. Clark says this means teachers need to be on their game—they need to think through lessons carefully, write them out and make sure that they're asking the right questions at the right time

## CONCLUSION

Selecting an ELA curriculum with rich content that builds on prior knowledge is integral to preparing students for achievement in school and after graduation.

"If we don't take the opportunity to teach our students using content-rich curriculum, we could be taking away their opportunity for success later in their academic careers," Peterson says. "Students are interested in learning about the world around them. When you give them a complex piece of text that is centered around real-world events and ideas, the learning almost happens automatically." ■



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## INSIDE AMPLIFY

Amplify is reimagining the way teachers teach and students learn. Each and students learn. Its products and services lead the way in data-driven instruction and next-generation digital curriculum and assessment. Amplify's Core Knowledge Language Arts elementary literacy program is devoted to eliminating the achievement gap by closing the knowledge gap, teaching today's rigorous standards in the context of content knowledge.

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