



Benchmark Workshop ©2020 & the Science of Reading

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Recently, there has been increased national, state, and local focus on how best to teach our youngest learners to read. With less than forty percent of our nation's children reading on grade level as assessed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), we are facing a national reading crisis. The conversation about reading, which has centered around the research-base contained in the science of reading from educational researchers, cognitive scientists, classroom practitioners, and others, has sparked a closer examination of which instructional materials are aligned to this body of knowledge. While a lot of the focus has been on foundational skills, like phonemic awareness and phonics, it also includes attention to the language comprehension needs of our youngest learners through rich vocabulary and content knowledge building.

Since most schools use some form of purchased instructional materials, it is increasingly important that school districts examine the connection between these materials and the science of reading. How do Benchmark's programs align to the current research on teaching beginning readers? Let's begin with instruction on phonics and other foundational skills (phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, concepts of print).

The foundational skills lessons and resources in Benchmark Phonics & Word Study Workshop were designed using the following guideposts aligned to the science of reading and the principles of structured literacy:

DECODING


Research-Based Scope and Sequence with Multiple Review Opportunities

A defined scope and sequence provides the spine on which all the phonics instruction rests. It's a roadmap for teachers, making clear the pacing of instruction, the skills to teach in each grade, and the amount of instructional focus. This includes when and how to review the skills so students can achieve mastery more rapidly.

The phonics sequence should offer a logical pathway through the key phonics skills, moving from easier to more complex skills and separating confusing sounds and letters. It should go from the known to the new in a way that makes the new learning easier and more obvious for young learners to grasp.

The review and repetition cycle being built into the scope and sequence is a critical, and often missed, aspect of an impactful scope and sequence. Most students need substantially

more time to master a skill than is afforded in curriculum materials (up to 4-6 weeks after the initial instruction). This detailed review and repetition cycle gets students to mastery faster so they can transfer the skill to all reading and writing situations – the ultimate goal of phonics instruction.




Benchmark Phonics & Word Study Workshop has a research-based scope and sequence that covers all grade-level standards, but also has a built-in review and repetition cycle to accelerate students' mastery and avoid decayed learning. The scope and sequence charts at the beginning of each teacher's guide lists the target and review skills, which are included in the weekly lessons.

Phonics instruction that is random or primarily book-based is not aligned to the science of reading. It does not provide enough consistent review and repetition of skills. Often this type of instruction is linked to leveled readers that do not contain many words that can be sounded out using the phonics skills taught or there is a large disconnect between the phonics instruction and reading application. This results in students under-relying on their phonics skills and developing reading habits that will not serve them well as they progress to more difficult texts.

Systematic and Explicit Instruction

Phonics instruction aligned to the science of reading teaches the phonics skills as a system that can be generalized and applied immediately to the reading and writing of text. The instruction not only follows a defined scope and sequence with a built-in review and repetition cycle, it progresses from skill to skill in small stairsteps that make the new learning manageable. The initial introduction of each skill is explicitly stated and applied in ways that get students thinking and talking about how words work. This instruction is active and engaging for young learners as they develop and deepen their understanding of how English words work. This multisensory and multimodal instruction is also ideal for students with learning challenges, such as those with dyslexia.




Benchmark Phonics & Word Study Workshop has systematic and explicit instruction in which students are directly taught letter-sound connections (e.g., introduction, modeling, blending) and guided to apply those skills in reading and writing (word building, dictation, reading and writing about decodable text) using common structured literacy techniques – both multisensory and multimodal.

Instruction that is book-based, which is common in programs that are driven by leveled books in Kindergarten and Grade 1, teaches phonics skills in a random manner rather than being systematic. In addition, too often students are required to discover the connection between sounds and letters/spellings, even though some students lack the prerequisite skills to make these discoveries. This makes it difficult to internalize how the system works. This type of phonics instruction does not align to the science of reading.

Daily Application to Reading and Writing

It is in the application of phonics skills that the learning “sticks.” While students begin reading words in isolation during a phonics lesson, that should immediately be followed up with reading in connected text (decodable texts) and writing about those texts. It is in these activities that students are required to bring all their learning to the forefront. This application needs to be a daily part of the phonics instruction.

Accountable, decodable text is an essential, daily part of a phonics lesson. This text has a high percentage of words that can be sounded out based on the phonics skills taught. It might also include some taught high-frequency words to ensure natural-sounding and comprehensible text as well as a couple story words to create engaging stories students will enjoy reading and rereading to develop fluency. Writing about these texts, such as retellings or listing facts learned, requires students to use words with the target phonics skill and accelerates students’ learning and use of that skill.



Benchmark Phonics & Word Study Workshop has daily decodable text reading, including rereading of previously read stories to build fluency. These texts are instructive, engaging, and comprehensible – key characteristics of quality decodable texts. Students write in response to their readings of these decodable texts to apply directly their phonics skills through writing.

If students are only reading leveled texts in their reading instruction (with no decodable texts as part of their phonics instruction), there will be far too few words with the grade-level phonics standards for some students to get to mastery (especially in Kindergarten). This practice does not align to the science of reading.

Aligned Assessments


Assessment informs instruction. Phonics assessments should be tied to key learning outcomes and help teachers determine in a timely fashion what to reteach before it negatively affects students’ reading growth. They should also be viewed through two lenses – accuracy and automaticity. The accuracy lens informs the teacher if learning has

been achieved. The automaticity lens informs teachers if mastery has been achieved. It is a great indicator of decayed learning – a significant issue in phonics instruction if too little review, repetition, and application of the skill was provided during the instructional cycle.

Two types of assessments are essential for phonics instruction. The first type of assessment is a comprehensive phonics survey. This assessment requires students to read words, often nonsense words, from simple to more complex. The assessment is organized around clusters of skills (e.g., short vowels, long vowels) that follow a clearly defined scope and sequence so that students can be placed into that phonics continuum based on skill deficits. So, for example, a comprehensive phonics survey can determine that a Grade 2 student has not mastered some of the skills taught during Grade 1. This allows the teacher to target instruction and practice around those skills during small group lessons to fill those holes in the student’s phonics foundation.

The second type of assessment is a cumulative assessment. This assessment is administered more frequently to each student, such as every 3-4 weeks. The assessment contains words with the current phonics target skill as well as words with previously taught skills. Students read the word list as the teacher marks accuracy and automaticity (two markings per word). This allows the teacher to check for mastery (lots of automaticity markings) and decayed learning (accuracy markings decreasing over time). Teachers use this information to adjust whole group instruction (to include more work with skills many students have yet to master) and small group instruction (catching phonics skill issues before they become serious reading problems).

Additional important assessment data can be gathered by listening to students read and analyzing student writing. Since writing lags behind reading in young learners, it is an important assessment tool. If students are consistently using specific phonics skills in writing, then teachers know students can read words with those skills. If phonics skills are not consistently applied in writing, then teachers can adjust instruction and practice, such as focusing more on those phonics skills during dictation and blending exercises.



Benchmark Phonics & Word Study Workshop has a comprehensive phonics survey (QPA) administered a few times a year. This assessment evaluates students’ phonics and phonemic awareness skills along a research-based continuum. In addition, weekly cumulative assessments are offered and check students’ accuracy and fluency reading words with the week’s phonics skills along with the previous 5 weeks’ skills. This allows teachers to look at mastery over time, check for decayed learning, and make adjustments to whole group and small group instruction.

Other instructional materials lack any formal phonics assessment or only check on students' phonics growth 2-3 times a year using a comprehensive assessment that doesn't provide granular enough information for teachers to act upon. This practice does not align to the science of reading. In addition, in many schools whose reading curriculum is dominated by leveled books, students are sent to the next level or grade with only a reading level designation (e.g., Level D). This is the primary source of information the teacher receives. So, for example, some students enter Grade 2 with a reading level that is on-level. However, when a comprehensive phonics survey is administered, phonics skill "gaps" or deficits are discovered – skills students were supposed to have mastered in Grade 1. Over-relying on one assessment as students move up the levels and across the grades is insufficient information. This practice also does not align to the science of reading.

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Vocabulary and Content (Background) Knowledge

In order to be a skilled, fluent reader with adequate comprehension, it takes more than decoding skills. The well-known Reading Rope model developed by Hollis Scarborough rightly notes that language comprehension is also necessary. Readers rely on their knowledge of the meanings of specific words (vocabulary) in a text and their background content knowledge related to the topic of that text. These skills intertwine with decoding as the student tackles and accesses this new text. Decoding without deep levels of language competencies will not result in skilled reading, just as deep levels of language competencies without decoding will not. Readers need both and the teachers in the early primary grades must devote significant instructional time to them.



Benchmark Workshop is organized around three-week knowledge strands (science, social studies, literacy) that deepen students vocabulary and content knowledge as students read multiple texts in these strands. Weekly read alouds offer additional opportunities to build these skills.

Instructional programs that are organized around levels rather than topics or knowledge strands don't allow for the deepening of vocabulary and content knowledge due to the limited books on any given topic. This practice does not align to the science of reading.

If your goal is to use instructional materials **aligned to the science of reading research** so that teachers can apply these practices effectively and efficiently, then **Benchmark Phonics & Word Study Workshop** brings these practices to your classrooms.