

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

February 24, 2004

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: A. McBeath, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: The Balanced Literacy Program in Edmonton Public Schools

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INFORMATION

Literacy Instruction

The Edmonton Public Schools Balanced Literacy Program (Brailsford, 2002) is an amalgamation of crucial learning elements and identified best practices for literacy achievement. The Balanced Literacy Program supports the view that teaching has to meet the needs of all learners in our classrooms. Each component of the Balanced Literacy Program is multilevel; each lesson provides critical learning for students functioning at a variety of levels. A tenet of the program is that students will move from support to independence in their Language Arts learnings. Teachers are required to model effective reading and writing practices for their students and to provide opportunities for guided and independent practice. Daily informal assessment strategies help teachers to identify the learning needs of each student in the classroom and the results are used to design instruction that carries them forward to higher levels of achievement. These key principles guide teachers as they implement their literacy program (Appendix I: Philosophy and Tenets of the Balanced Literacy Program).

Division one and two teachers are supported in the implementation of literacy instruction through the provision of a minimum of seventy (70) hours of in-servicing and coaching over a two-year period. The Balanced Literacy program has been aligned to match the division one Alberta Language Arts curriculum and it addresses all areas of language arts on a consistent and daily basis. Parent support of literacy development is encouraged (Appendix II: Balanced Literacy Information for School Newsletters). Literacy instruction is provided daily in each of the key areas: word study, reading, and writing.

Word Study

Each day the students in division one and two are engaged in activities designed to develop word recognition and spelling skills during the word work time. In kindergarten, teachers lay the foundation for beginning reading and writing. Kindergarten students spend a portion of their day engaging in activities that develop phonological awareness and phonemic awareness so that they will be receptive to the direct, explicit and systematic phonics instruction that is presented in grades one

to six. Within this comprehensive program, phonological awareness¹, phonemic sequencing² and phonetic knowledge³ is taught from kindergarten through to grade six.

One quarter (35 minutes) of the division one language arts time is devoted to the direct teaching of these areas on a daily basis. The structured word block teaching period includes a spelling program and systematic word building and sorting activities. These lessons engage students in explicit and systematic activities that help students to use phonics elements, word patterns and analogies. For example, if you know how to spell “wish”, that will help you spell the words “dish,” “swish,” and “wishing.” When making words, students use their knowledge of letter sound correspondence, common word family patterns, phonics and metacognitive strategies (for example: “Does the word have a sound pattern you know?”) to help them build a series of new words. Each word is presented within a meaningful contextual sentence, provided for daily models of appropriate grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Transfer of learning to contextual reading and writing situations is strongly emphasized.

In Division two, twenty to twenty-five minutes is devoted to daily word study. For a portion of the time, students work on a spelling program that continues to introduce and review the most common high frequency words and tricky (misspelled) words, supported by the use of dictionaries and word walls. The balance of the time provides for continued work on:

- decoding and spelling multi-syllabic words
- word building using prefixes, suffixes and root words
- analysis and use of increasingly complex phonetic patterns
- identification of common contractions, homonyms, synonyms and antonyms
- dictionary usage
- vocabulary development
- the transfer of phonetic patterns into contextual reading and writing assignments.

Reading

In division one, seventy (70) minutes each day is spent teaching students to read. These comprehensive reading sessions emphasize a support to independence model that includes read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. Quality student’s literature, the use of expository text, narrative and poetic text structures, and the links between reading and writing receive focus. During the highly supportive Read Aloud time the teacher provides an exemplary reading model and develops the rhythm, sound, and sense of written language. In Shared Reading the teacher offers scaffolded support, once again modelling reading but also inviting and encouraging the children to read along and interact with print. Strategies are taught to help the children with contextual word recognition and comprehension. In Guided Reading the teacher levels the texts and ensures that children read at their instructional levels. The supports and challenges of each text are evaluated, and the teacher provides enough guidance to help the children to engage in reading problem solving within a successful reading experience. In Independent Reading the teacher provides levelled materials that the children can read on their own allowing significant opportunities to practice reading strategies previously taught in the group setting.

¹ Phonological Awareness – general awareness of the sound system underpinning oral language (intonations, phrasing, rhymes, alliterations, onsets and rimes, and phonemes)

² Phonemic Sequencing – specific attention to the individual sounds in word and their order within words

³ Phonetic Knowledge – knowledge of the visual-sound associations in language

The Read Aloud component continues on into division two where carefully chosen materials provide opportunities to link Guided Reading and whole Class Strategy lessons addressing reading comprehension. Each of the four types of reading (read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading) with the addition of Class Strategy are moved around flexibly to make a daily “Reading Hour”.

Writing

The thirty five (35) minute daily writing component (in division one) incorporates a workshop approach that includes write aloud (teacher demonstrations), shared writing, guided writing, independent writing, and sharing (among class members). Cross curriculum links, interconnections with reading and research, preplanning with graphic organizers, and age-appropriate involvement in a variety of text structures are addressed. In Write Aloud the teacher models and talks aloud as he or she provides a writing demonstration for the children. In Shared Writing the teacher will continue to develop a piece of class writing only this time actively involving the children. The teacher facilitates and guides as the children add ideas, spelling, punctuation, and editing suggestions. During Guided and Independent Writing the children write on their own but receive guidance and support from the teacher as required. Guided Writing groups may be convened to work on aspects of writing when there are several children with similar needs. It is important to note that the whole class receives prewriting support via the use of the writing organizers and the integration of writing strategies into the content area subjects is strongly encouraged. In division two, timetables require that the writing lessons occur in the content subjects as much as in the language arts time.

Conclusion

The question, “What is good literacy instruction?” continues to be asked by teachers, administrators, professors and researchers. The contention of the Balanced Literacy program is that literacy instruction should address all aspects of the language arts curriculum with specific attention to crucial learning elements. Working with words (including the mastering of high frequency words, phonics, and spelling instruction) is part of a comprehensive language arts program. Equally important is the need for students to experience a continuum of reading and writing activities (teacher directed to independent practice) in order for them to become proficient readers and writers. A lively, dynamic program that is delivered by a knowledgeable and supportive teacher and involves children in daily opportunities to develop word, reading, and writing skills is critical to student achievement in the area of language arts.

The larger question that also needs to be asked is, “Can students in the district and the province read?” District data on both Highest Level of Achievement Tests (HLATs) and Alberta Learning Achievement Tests show incremental increases in percentages of students reading at or above grade level. As well, the level of reading achievement in the district and the province is significantly higher than international levels. The most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which included results from 32 countries, showed that Alberta students ranked higher than any other participating nation in the area of reading. Alberta students ranked third highest in mathematics, behind only Japan and Quebec. As well, Alberta students ranked third in science, just behind their counterparts in Korea and Japan.

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APPENDIX I: The Philosophy and Tenets of the Balanced Literacy Program
APPENDIX II: Balanced Literacy Information for School Newsletters

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THE PHILOSOPHY AND TENETS OF THE BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM

1. Children will move from supported to independent learning in Language Arts.
2. All children will read at their Instructional Levels in Guided Reading groups, and at their Independent Levels when reading on their own.
3. Students will receive direct, explicit instruction and incidental teaching on spelling, word recognition/analysis, comprehension, and writing strategies on a daily basis.
4. Direct instruction will be multilevel to meet the needs of all class members.
5. Children will receive daily Independent Reading and Guided Writing practice.
6. Modeling and mini lessons will be planned to preface each Writing session.
7. Integration of Balanced Literacy strategies with other curriculum areas is strongly encouraged.
8. Professional development for teachers is intrinsic to the program.
 - It is recommended that teachers receive continuous inservicing, coaching and support during the first year of the program. This type of consultative help should continue during the second year.
 - It is recommended that teachers trained in the Balanced Literacy Program support new teacher learners within their schools. Teachers should be able to visit other teachers' classrooms in an open manner, to both receive support and provide support for professional learning.
9. A regular timetable and routines will be established to cover all components of the program. Continuity of direct instruction and literacy practice will then follow.
10. Homes will be encouraged to be part of the program via the provision of developmentally appropriate practice activities (e.g. Word Wall and Making Words activities, and home reading).
11. The intent of the program is to create lifelong readers and writers. Affective engagement in all activities is a goal.
12. Assessment is an integral part of the Balanced Literacy Program.

Resource: Brailsford, Anne. (2002). *Balanced Literacy Division One*. Resource Development Services, Edmonton Public Schools.

BALANCED LITERACY INFORMATION FOR SCHOOL NEWSLETTERS

Balanced Literacy is a Language Arts program that covers all aspects of the Alberta language learning curriculum. It offers two hours and twenty minutes of Language Arts instruction to grades 1-3 students on a daily basis. Instruction is divided into three areas:

1. WORD BLOCK

Work focuses on learning word recognition and spelling skills. Function words (e.g. the, you, are) are learned and practised every day. A *Word Wall* (on the classroom wall) displays the words learned, and parents are asked to help the children practise the words at home. Phonics and word patterns are taught daily using hands-on techniques. Students are shown how to apply these skills in reading and writing tasks.

2. READING

In this block, the teacher reads aloud to the children and engages in shared choral reading practice with the whole class. Reading strategies for word recognition and comprehension are emphasized during shared reading. Following the whole class reading sessions, the children move into guided reading groups. Each child will be reading at his/her instructional level, from levelled books, and will receive direct instruction from the teacher. The other children will be practising independent reading. Home reading books are sent home regularly and are selected to match the child's needs from the levelled book collections.

3. WRITING

The writing block provided a structured program that focuses on prewriting planning, on teacher demonstrations of good writing practices and on the children's independent writing. Specific types of writing (e.g. stories, descriptive paragraphs, and report writing) are taught in each grade level.

The *Balanced Literacy Program* has been taught successfully in our schools for several years. We hope that your child enjoys and benefits from the program planned for your school.

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Resource: Brailsford, Anne. *Balanced Literacy Division One Manual*. Resource Development Services, Edmonton Public Schools, 2002.