



General Education Leadership Network

a MAISA Collaborative

Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Prekindergarten

This document was developed by the **Early Literacy Task Force**, a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN), which represents Michigan's 56 Intermediate School Districts. For a full list of representatives, please see the back page.



INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

This document is intended to be read in concert with Essential Instructional Practices in Language and Emergent Literacy: Birth to Age Three, and the Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K to 3. There is important overlap and continuity in these three documents, and some children will benefit from instructional practices identified in multiple documents.

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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to increase Michigan's capacity to provide effective and equitable early literacy practices for every child every day. The document identifies research-supported instructional practices in prekindergarten that should be a basis of professional learning, policy, and instruction throughout the state. Research indicates that each of these practices can have a positive impact on literacy development. The use of these practices in every classroom every day is expected to make a measurable positive difference in the state's literacy achievement. The practices should be viewed, as in practice guides in medicine, as presenting a minimum "standard of care" for Michigan's children. Other documents available at literacyessentials.org address other age groups, grade levels, and aspects of education systems, including coaching practices, school-level practices, and systems-level practices.

Throughout this document, we use the term "teachers" to encompass educators in home-based, center-based, and school-based settings. We use the term "classroom" broadly to encompass any indoor and outdoor learning environments that are used to provide education to young children. We use the term "prekindergarten" to encompass the two to three years after toddlerhood and before beginning kindergarten.

Core Commitments

The MAISA GELN Early Literacy Task Force is united in our belief that all children thrive when research deeply informs practice; education builds on every child’s interests and individual, cultural, and linguistic assets; and educators hold high expectations for all children’s development. Indeed, the Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy were built upon the premise that it is unacceptable for some Michigan children to experience research-supported instructional practices while others do not—especially in cases in which the quality of instruction is determined by children’s socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, cultural, or other background characteristics. We are committed to an education system in which educators, families, communities, and children are respected and supported. We are also committed to working against all forms of bias that cause harm and that lead to inequitable education, in literacy and across all areas of development.

Enabling Conditions

Use of the *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy* should occur daily in school or childcare settings that are supportive and effective for children not only in literacy, but in all areas of development. There are many wide-ranging conditions that enable children to thrive in all areas of development, including literacy. A few key examples of such conditions include:

- an asset orientation toward children and their families and communities
- positive relationships between and among teachers, children, and families
- opportunities for children to develop healthy identities
- culturally relevant¹, responsive², and sustaining³ pedagogical approaches throughout the day
- a playful approach to teaching and learning and lots of opportunities for children to play
- sufficient time for physical activity, meals, and play

For additional information about enabling conditions, see the [*Essential School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices in Literacy and Mathematics, Prekindergarten and Elementary Grades*](#).

Robust Resources

This document offers instructional practices, not a curriculum or curricular resources. Districts and other educational organizations, in consultation with educators and other experts, should provide, at minimum, curriculum materials that address all areas encompassed in early childhood curricula and that include abundant materials to read to young children (see Essential Eight). Educators, districts, and other educational organizations should use frameworks⁴ that can guide the selection of materials and the design of curricular units and lessons. Frameworks that are used should attend to such factors as alignment to research; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and the goals of multiple stakeholders, including national and state organizations (e.g., standards documents), local educators, library media specialists, members of the local community, families, and children themselves. Materials should be coordinated and adapted as needed to reflect findings from research.

Essential Practices

The recommended instructional practices are to occur throughout the day, largely integrated into opportunities for learning in all other areas, not in an isolated block identified as “English Language Arts” or “Literacy.” Oral and written language development should not be the only focus of prekindergarten education. There should be ample room for development in other areas. Later academic achievement is predicted not only by oral and written knowledge and skill but also by mathematics learning, knowledge of the natural and social world, and certain aspects of social, emotional, and physical development⁵.

It is also important to understand that this is not an exhaustive list of research-supported instructional practices, although practices not on this list should be carefully scrutinized with respect to alignment to research on literacy instruction. We should actively resist neglecting any of these research-supported practices. Every child in every classroom deserves teachers who implement each of these research-supported practices because they are important, interconnected, and necessary.

Within and across the prekindergarten years, practices should be implemented in developmentally sensitive and responsive ways. All practices listed below are for regular classroom instruction (i.e., Tier 1) and are appropriate for children of all linguistic backgrounds who are learning an alphabetic language. Within all practices, opportunities should be provided for translanguaging, that is, for children to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, including both nonverbal and verbal means of communication and all dialects and languages they are learning.

1. Intentional use of literacy artifacts in dramatic play and throughout the learning environment ⁶

Reading and writing materials are not only present but used throughout the learning environment in both teacher-led and child-led play.

- Within daily opportunities for dramatic play, the teacher provides, models use of, and encourages children’s engagement with appropriate literacy artifacts, such as:
 - order pads, menus, and placemats for a pizza parlor
 - traffic signs, maps, blueprints, and building-related books in the block/construction area
 - envelopes, stationery, postcards, stamps, and actual mail for a post office
 - waiting room reading material, a schedule, and a prescription pad for a doctor’s office
- Within centers and other areas of the classroom, children are encouraged to interact with reading and writing materials, such as:
 - books related to construction or building in the block or construction area
 - simple recipes for making snacks
 - labels that indicate where items go
 - children’s names, for example, on cubbies and sign-in sheets, which may vary over time (e.g., first, with photos, then later, without photos)
 - writing materials in each area of the classroom for drawing and writing—for example about objects being observed in the science area
 - story-related and replica toys (e.g., a miniature fire station play set)
 - digital tools aligned to screen-use guidelines and with carefully curated, research-aligned digital games and applications, digital picture books, e-books, and videos

2. Read aloud with reference to print ⁷

Daily read-alouds include verbal and nonverbal strategies for drawing children’s attention to print, such as:

- running fingers under words
- noting specific features of print and letters (e.g., “That is the letter ‘d’, like in Deondre’s name.”)
- asking children where to start reading and where to go next at the end of a line of text (i.e., return sweep)
- counting words
- pointing out print within pictures

3. Interactive read-alouds with a comprehension and vocabulary focus ⁸

The teacher reads aloud, in culturally and developmentally responsive ways, age-appropriate books and other materials, print or digital, described in Essential Eight, including by:

- reading sets of texts that are thematically and conceptually related
- reading some texts multiple times with varied instructional foci
- engaging in higher-order discussion among children and teacher before, during, and after reading (e.g., with open-ended questions that invite children to respond in their own words and draw upon their knowledge and experiences)
- providing child-friendly, culturally relevant explanations of words within the text
- revisiting words after reading using tools such as movement, props, video, photo, examples, and nonexamples that support children in relating new words to known words and encourage children to say the words aloud
- using the words at other points in the day and over time
- teaching clusters of words related to those in the text, such as vocabulary related to garden or gardening

4. Play with sounds inside words ⁹

Although phonological awareness as a construct does not involve letters, phonological awareness instruction is best provided primarily in connection to letters. Teachers support phonological awareness development through various activities, such as:

- listening to and creating variations on books with rhyming or alliteration
- singing certain songs (e.g., “Willoughby, Wallaby Woo,” “Down by the Bay,” “The Name Game,” “Apples and Bananas”)
- sorting pictures and objects by a sound or sounds in the name of each object
- playing games and leading transitions that feature play with sounds (e.g., alliteration games, a transition that asks all children whose names begin with the “mmm” sound to move to the next activity)
- engaging in “robot talk” or the like (e.g., the teacher has a robot-sounding puppet say the sounds “ffff” “iiii” “shhhhh,” and children say “fish”)

5. Brief, clear, systematic, and explicit instruction¹⁰ in letter names, the sound(s) associated with the letters, and how the letters are shaped and formed¹¹

Instruction that has been shown to be effective in fostering the development of letter-sound knowledge is supported by tools and practices such as:

- a high-quality alphabet chart¹²
- cards with children’s names
- attention to how the teacher and children form and articulate sounds¹³
- opportunities to write the letters while learning their sounds
- alphabet books with appropriate keywords (please see the first bullet of this Essential)
- lowercase letters embedded in pictures of objects that begin with a primary sound of that letter (e.g., a lowercase “a” embedded in the image of an apple)
- references throughout the day (e.g., “That sign says the store is open. The first letter is ‘o.’ It makes the ‘oh’ sound: oooooopen.”)

Research suggests that we should set a benchmark of children naming 18 uppercase and 15 lowercase letters by the end of prekindergarten and should teach letter-sound associations rather than letter names or sounds alone. High-frequency word instruction is not appropriate for prekindergarten.

6. Interactions around writing¹⁴

Adults engage in deliberate interactions with children around writing. Opportunities for children to write their names, informational, narrative, and other texts that are personally meaningful to them are at the heart of writing experiences. Children progress through a series of phases of writing development, from drawing as writing to scribbling to letter-like forms to random letter strings to representing some sounds in words with letters to (after preschool) representing all sounds in words. Attention should focus on sharing ideas, rather than just forming letters and spelling words, as children move through phases of writing development. Deliberate interactions around writing include the use of interactive writing and scaffolded writing techniques.

- Interactive writing involves children in contributing to a piece of writing in which the teacher leads the writing and addresses children’s developmental strengths and needs through explicit teaching, modeling, and involving children in writing in order to jointly compose a text. With the teacher’s support, children determine/compose the content of the message, count the words, stretch words, listen for sounds within words, think about letters that represent those sounds, and write some of the letters. The teacher uses interactive writing as an opportunity for instruction—for example, regarding the directionality of writing, purposes for writing, and specific sound-letter relationships.
- Scaffolded writing involves the individual child in generating a message the child would like to write. The message is negotiated and repeated with the child until it is internalized. The teacher draws one line for each word in the message using a highlighter or pen. The child writes one “word” per line, where the “word” might be a scribble, letter-like form, random letter string, or one or a few letters within the word.

As indicated in Essential One of this document, materials for writing are available throughout the classroom as well as in an area primarily devoted to opportunities to write, and adults engage regularly to support children in classroom areas where writing may occur.

7. Extended conversation ¹⁵

Adults engage in interactions with children that regularly include:

- responding to and initiating conversations with children, with repeated turns back and forth on the same topic
- encouraging talk among children through the selective use of open-ended questions, commenting on what children are doing, offering prompts (e.g., “Try asking your friend how you can help.”), and scaffolding higher-order discussion, particularly during content-area learning
- modeling and providing practice with discussion that encourages a variety of ways for children to communicate with one another and the teacher (e.g., gestures, multiple languages, multiple dialects, and all of their linguistic resources)
- talking, including narrating and explaining, within dramatic play experiences and content-area learning, including intentional vocabulary-building efforts
- extending children’s language (e.g., The child says, “Fuzzy.” The adult says, “That peach feels fuzzy to me, too. What else do you notice about it?”)
- discussing past and future events
- storytelling/story acting (individually and collaboratively dictating stories, acting out stories, and serving as an audience for others’ stories)

8. Provision of abundant reading, listening, and viewing material in the classroom ¹⁶

The teacher reads aloud, interacts with children around, and provides access to:

- a wide range of books and other texts, print and digital, including information books, poetry, and storybooks that are physically accessible to children (i.e., within children’s reach), that portray groups of people in ways that are multidimensional, not all the same, and that challenge stereotypes
- books and other materials connected to children’s interests, including texts that reflect children’s backgrounds and cultural experiences, texts that reflect the backgrounds and cultural experiences of others, and texts that incorporate both, including class- and child-made books
- recorded books, videos, and digital picture books with and without written words and animations
- books from the classroom, school, and/or public library that teachers support children in borrowing to bring home and/or in accessing digitally (e.g., through MeL.org)
- comfortable places in which to look at books, frequently visited by the teacher(s) and by volunteers recruited to the classroom in order to support and encourage children’s engagement with texts

9. Ongoing observation and other forms of assessment of children’s language and literacy development that informs their education

The teacher:

- engages in observation and other forms of assessment that are not biased by race, socioeconomic status, or other factors and that are guided by:
 - the teacher’s understanding of language and literacy development
 - the Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten and, if applicable, the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework
- observes in multiple authentic contexts—including play, learning centers, outdoors, and whole- and small-group experiences—to inform specific instructional targets
- employs assessment tools that are considered appropriate for prekindergarten contexts
- uses information from observations and assessment tools to plan and carry out instruction and engage in interactions with children

10. Collaboration with families, caregivers, and the community in promoting literacy¹⁷

Families, caregivers, and the community engage in language and literacy interactions with their children that can be drawn upon and extended in preschool. Preschool educators should work together to incorporate family, caregivers, and community funds of knowledge, assets, and perspectives into the classroom. Classroom teachers should serve as connectors between schools and families by:

- inviting families, caregivers, and community members:
 - to read, present, and lead activities that share their personal and professional knowledge and engage children in literacy experiences in school
 - to work together with teachers to develop ways to build upon and further incorporate literacy-promoting strategies into everyday activities, such as cooking, communicating with friends and family, and traveling in the bus or car
- collaborating with families and caregivers regarding ways to read aloud to children and engage children in discussions during reading and writing
- incorporating songs, oral storytelling, and other texts from children’s homes and communities into classroom activities (e.g., from cultural institutions in the community, neighborhood businesses)
- promoting literacy milestones (e.g., pretend-reading, which some parents mistakenly believe is “cheating” but is actually a desired activity in literacy development)
- encouraging families to speak with children in their home/most comfortable language, whether or not that language is English
- providing literacy-supporting resources, such as:
 - books and other materials from the classroom and digital libraries that children can borrow, use, or keep that reflect Essential Eight, bullet one
 - children’s magazines, videos, and digital picture books with and without words
 - information about judicious, adult-supported use of educational television and applications that can, with guidance, support literacy development
 - announcements about local events
 - passes to local museums (for example, through www.michiganactivitypass.info)
 - ideas that promote children’s interactions with family members while engaging in literacy and language activities (e.g., writing books together about the child and their family)

See also Essentials Eight, Nine, and Ten of the [*Essential School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices in Literacy and Mathematics, Prekindergarten and Elementary Grades*](#).

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- 13 Children’s linguistic backgrounds and their speech and language development affect how they pronounce sounds. Teachers should not focus on getting children to pronounce sounds the way that they do. Rather, teachers’ focus should be on making sure that each child has a sound that they consistently associate with that letter, and teachers should make sure that the way the child pronounces the sound in a word allows them to connect that word to the concept. It is extremely important to be aware of children’s speech and language development and linguistic backgrounds when teaching the alphabet and to approach the process with an asset-oriented view of children’s language(s).
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Process for Development and Review

This document was developed in 2016 by the Early Literacy Task Force, a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN), which represents Michigan’s 56 Intermediate School Districts. Its update was published in 2023 (lead updating team, in alphabetical order: Emily Caylor, Nell K. Duke, Gwendolyn Thompson McMillon, Mary Patillo-Dunn, and Tanya S. Wright). The Task Force included representatives from the following organizations, although their participation does not necessarily indicate endorsement by the organization they represent:

313 Reads	Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association
Early Childhood Administrators’ Network, Michigan Association of Intermediate School Districts	Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative
English Language Arts Leadership Network of Michigan Association of Intermediate School Districts	Michigan Reading Association
General Education Leadership Network of Intermediate School Districts in Michigan	Michigan State University
Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning	Michigan Virtual University
Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators	Oakland University
Michigan Association of Media Educators	Reading NOW Network
Michigan Association of Supervisors of Special Education	Regional Educational Media Centers Association of Michigan
Michigan Department of Education	Southwest Michigan Reading Council
	Technology Readiness Infrastructure Grant
	University of Michigan

Feedback on drafts of the document was elicited from other stakeholders, resulting in a number of revisions to the document.” to “Input and feedback on drafts of the original and updated document were elicited from other stakeholders, resulting in a number of revisions to the document.

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