

MONITORING REPORT: Policy R-2.1 (Academic Achievement: English Language Arts)

PHASE ONE: Interpretation, Benchmark Data, and Goals

DATE: March 2019

Policy

All students will master the skills and demonstrate proficiency in each required discipline and electives.

Discipline: English Language Arts

Interpretation

We understand this policy expresses the School Board's expectation that all students in each grade band will demonstrate mastery of State-defined ELA (English Language Arts) content, concepts, and practices as measured by State and/or local assessments. Or they will provide evidence they are making reasonable progress toward such mastery.

Beyond this clinical interpretation based on State requirements, we understand that the School Board recognizes the central role English Language Arts plays in the progression of a child's learning. That is, the skills acquired through language arts -- reading, writing, speaking, and listening -- are not only important independently, but they are also necessary for success in other areas of study. Students must be able to use language arts skills effectively both to absorb content from others subjects and to express their knowledge of those other subjects. Reading fluency and comprehension are critical to understanding nearly everything that is taught. Writing and speaking are necessary for communicating what has been learned. In this way, English Language Arts is foundational to all academic achievement in our schools.

The Board also knows that the need for proficiency in English Language Arts extends beyond the schoolhouse. The four components of ELA are essential elements of nearly every career. Almost all professionals -- from accountants and lawyers to engineers and doctors -- need to be proficient in reading, writing, speaking, and listening to advance in their fields. Good communication skills are routinely cited by employers as necessary pre-requisites when hiring at all levels. Above all, a young person who has made the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn is equipped to meet the challenge we so frequently hear from society's future-focused leaders: the need to be a lifelong learner.

The Board further understands that mastery of English Language Arts -- particularly reading -- is an equity issue. Research studies have shown that students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma than proficient readers (*Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*). With this understanding of the long-term effects of NOT reading at grade level, the Board expects us to make English Language Arts in general, and reading in particular, a top priority

Benchmark Data ELA

At the Elementary level, Ferndale students in grades 3, 4, and 5 are formally assessed in ELA each spring using the SBA (Smarter Balanced Assessment), as required by the State of Washington. In addition, we regularly measure students' ELA understanding and skills with other local and/or State assessments. Specifically, we use the DIBELS assessments (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) to monitor students in all elementary grades in order to ensure they are making expected progress. Or, if they are not, to provide them with needed instructional support and/or remediation.

At the Middle and High School levels, students in grades 6, 7, 8, and 10 are also assessed in ELA each spring using the SBA (Smarter Balanced Assessment), as prescribed by the State.

ELA achievement data from the 2017-2018 SBA are displayed in the chart below, which clearly shows a need for growth in this critical area of student achievement.

SBA English Language Arts Assessment Data from 2017-2018				
Percent of Elementary Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards				
	3 rd Grade	4 th Grade	5 th Grade	
Ferndale SD	46.1%	48.2%	61.5%	
WA State	55.5%	57.3%	59.2%	
Percent of Secondary Students Meeting or Exceeding Standard				
	6 th Grade	7 th Grade	8 th Grade	10 th Grade
Ferndale SD	47.3%	54.9%	50.4%	66.2%
WA State	55.9%	59.6%	58.9%	69.5%

SBA English Language Arts Assessment Data from 2016-2017				
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Percent of Elementary Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards				
	3 rd Grade	4 th Grade	5 th Grade	
Ferndale SD	48.9%	48.7%	50.1%	
WA State	52.6%	55.2%	58.6%	
Percent of Secondary Students Meeting or Exceeding Standard				
	6 th Grade	7 th Grade	8 th Grade	11 th Grade
Ferndale SD	51.7%	56.8%	51.6%	76.6%
WA State	55.5%	60.1%	58.5%	73.6%

Goals

Our District goal in ELA has remained unchanged for a decade: “All students reading at grade level or above.” The way we are currently working to meet this goal, however, reflects a significant change in our thinking about school improvement in the content areas. Our past practice was to set District Improvement Goals such as “the number of students meeting or exceeding ELA achievement standards will increase by 10% this year in all grades.” Or, conversely, “the number of students who fail to meet standard will decrease by 10% at all grades.”

We have learned that setting such general targets alone is not enough. Like those of us creating District Improvement Plans, our principals and instructional staff *want* to meet the ELA goal. They want all students to achieve mastery of ELA standards. But they need more coaching in how to use formative assessments and other data to identify their students’ specific learning needs. They need more guidance and support in identifying, implementing, monitoring, and, if necessary, abandoning the specific strategies they use to meet their students’ identified needs.

In recognition of the needs of our principals and instructional staff, we have been working with Building Improvement Teams in each of our schools to make use of the new Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF) as a tool for digging deeper and responding more precisely to the achievement gaps that exist for the sub-populations they serve. This new way of working is moving us away from our past practice of writing and revising high-level annual improvement plans toward creating three-year plans grounded in lasting, research-validated, carefully-selected changes in classroom practice.

All of our building teams are learning how to use a Cycle of Inquiry approach that employs frequent classroom-based formative assessments as accountability checks. Through such assessments, teachers are identifying and addressing the needs of students who are not making adequate progress on a regular basis, not just at the end of a term. This new approach is requiring us to focus much more closely on selecting instructional strategies and implementing them with fidelity so that we are able to institutionalize the ones that provide the best return on investment.

Recognizing that this approach requires new ways of thinking for teachers -- “I can’t just pull out the lesson plan I used in March last year” -- the State has significantly changed the timeframe for school improvement work. Instead of writing and submitting annual plans and setting generalized short-term goals (like everyone will go up by 10%), the State has established a three-year planning and implementation cycle that requires us to look at growth school by school and classroom by classroom.

By the time we submit our next ELA report, we will be able to provide:

1. Specific three-year English Language Arts goals for every building and grade band, along with the progress that has been made toward meeting those goals.
2. A list of the two or three specific instructional strategies being employed in each school or grade band, along with information about the return on investment we are seeing from those strategies.
3. A class by call analysis of growth in English Language Arts achievement.
4. An analysis of gaps in English Language Arts achievement by sub-groups and our plan for addressing those gaps.