

# Five Essential Features of Knowledge-Rich Curriculum



Nearly every major educational goal—from improving reading comprehension to deepening critical thinking—is knowledge based. Without a broad, solid foundation of knowledge and vocabulary built from the first days of school, better student outcomes will not be achieved. Yet, in many schools, the curriculum has narrowed. We must ensure that history, science, geography, art, music, and more are generously taught to all students, especially those least likely to gain such knowledge outside school.

In the elementary grades, most children can master foundational skills (e.g., fluently sounding out words) in fairly short periods of systematic daily instruction. What takes more time is building the knowledge and vocabulary on which comprehension depends. Reimagining elementary-grades curricula is our best hope for raising reading achievement.

*All elementary schools should provide a knowledge-rich curriculum that is:*

- **Specific:** Topic by topic, the specific content children will learn throughout the year should be clearly stated. For example, “compare and contrast three ancient civilizations” is too vague; “compare and contrast ancient civilizations in China, Egypt, and the Middle East” offers better instructional guidance.
- **Cumulative:** Grade by grade, the specific content should be cumulative, ensuring that children are developing both deep and broad knowledge—that they are not studying ancient Egypt twice without ever being introduced to ancient Greece. Only by collaboratively mapping out the topics for each grade can educators ensure that their curriculum does not have boring repetitions or problematic gaps.
- **Well rounded:** Not only are the sciences, social studies, and arts necessary for reading comprehension because of the knowledge and vocabulary they convey, these subjects are inherently interesting. They bring wonder and excitement to the classroom, making them necessary to inspire a love of learning.
- **Preparatory:** From literature to chemistry to music, each discipline offers far more engaging and enriching content than could possibly fit into the elementary years. Educators should select the content that offers the best preparation for later studies. While some time could be set aside to pursue children’s interests, children do not know what background knowledge is necessary to succeed in challenging courses in later grades.
- **Rigorous:** Even in kindergarten and first grade, children are ready for rigorous academic topics. But rigorous does not mean stressful or boring. Young children enjoy complex topics if they are immersed in a carefully planned series of read-alouds, discussions, and projects that start with a basic introduction and build toward deeper understanding.

“The mistaken idea that reading is a skill may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in the country. The knowledge base problem must be solved.”

—Daniel Willingham, University of Virginia

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Children are curious and capable. When introduced to new ideas through read-alouds, discussions, and projects, they can understand complex historical and scientific concepts and greatly expand their vocabulary. Still, misunderstandings will happen and details will be forgotten. Not to worry. Topics introduced in the early grades will be revisited in greater depth later on. The elementary curriculum should build a well-rounded academic foundation—and provide a window on our fascinating world.

While there are hundreds, if not thousands, of ways to construct an enriching curriculum that exemplifies the five criteria, the following example is offered as inspiration. It's far from complete, yet it shows how quickly children can become well informed—and grow into strong readers—when they are given a thoughtfully sequenced, knowledge-building curriculum.

	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade
<b>World History</b>	Ancient civilizations in China, Egypt, and the Middle East	Ancient Greece and Rome	Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas
<b>U.S. History</b>	The 18th century: Native Americans, colonies, and the struggle for independence	The 19th century: Westward expansion and the struggle for freedom	The 20th century: Technological progress, protecting freedom around the world, and the struggle for equality
<b>Arts in U.S. History</b>	Native American baskets, pottery, and beadwork, and folk art paintings	Songs of liberty (e.g., “Star Spangled Banner”), African American spirituals, and Hudson River School paintings	Modern art, jazz, and the impact of radio and recording on popular music
<b>Life Science</b>	Common North American habitats: Forests, grasslands, wetlands, and deserts	Unique North American habitats: The Florida Everglades, Rocky Mountains, and Mojave Desert	Extreme habitats: Life in the Arctic, the Antarctic, and on the equator
<b>Astronomy</b>	Earth, sun, and moon	Our solar system	Orbits, rotation and revolution, and the phases of our moon

Knowledge-rich curriculum “restores elementary teachers to their rightful place as guides to the world.”

—David Coleman, College Board

