

Reading & Literacy

“The development of literacy will be one of the primary aims and focuses of effort in the School. This will include a great deal of reading from a variety of both fiction and non-fiction primary literature. Particularly in the early grades, the School will emphasize reading and more reading.” (LCS Charter)

Most American schools dedicate two or more hours each day to “literacy.” A majority of time is spent teaching children the fundamentals of reading strategies, such as making inferences, predicting, classifying, and “looking for the main idea.” The purpose of these exercises is to bolster test scores, independent of real knowledge. In contrast, Liberty strives to develop the appreciation of language, increase specific knowledge, and provide meaning to students through the achievement of Primary Literacy, Mature Literacy, and Moral Literacy.

Primary Literacy

Primary Literacy begins with phonic recognition. Our Charter states, *“In the early grades, students will receive explicit, systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. Children will be provided deliberate, coherent, direct instruction in letter-sound correspondences. Practices which teach children to rely on word-memorization (the look-say method) and guessing (through illustration and/or context) will be avoided.”*

Once phonetic decoding skills are introduced, fluency must be developed. Fluency allows students to focus their mental energies on comprehension rather than decoding. Fluency means “flowing,” and in this context it also means “fast.”

Fluency takes practice - a lot of it. Riggs & Open Court Phonics, selected stories from Open Court, and selected books from Accelerated Reader (AR) have been approved by the BOD for the development of decoding skills and fluency at Liberty.

Teachers should use discretion and select Open Court stories and AR books which are content-based and meet the principles of this policy and the Literature Acquisition policy to the greatest extent possible. Child-centered stories and books of a trivial nature (see Mature Literacy below) should be avoided. If a teacher is uncertain as to the appropriateness of a particular book or story, he/she should consult the Headmaster and/or Academic Advisory Committee. AR books (and the corresponding tests) which do not meet the principles of this policy should not be maintained in the classroom.

Although the approved Open Court and AR materials are necessary for practicing early literacy skills, these books can quickly bore students and may not develop language appreciation. Language is at the heart of reading. The love of the sound of language will carry with a child, if it is properly developed. Children need to discover at an early age the peculiar satisfaction that comes from experiencing form in language, as in nursery rhymes and poetry. When this occurs, children will continue to prefer the sound of beautiful or interesting language as they later select books for meaning. Furthermore, we believe young children should be shown incrementally what is outside their realm of experience. Children who are exposed to complex speech patterns learn to express themselves earlier and more fluently than those spoken to in careful sentences.

In the early grades nursery rhymes, poetry, fairy tales, and captivating stories, beyond the students’ own reading abilities, will be read aloud to children. In addition to the development of language appreciation, this practice fosters the desire in children to master the difficult skill of reading in order that the students might gain personal access to the exciting world of stories.

Mature Literacy

“Mature literacy develops as students become acquainted with a broad and rich body of knowledge and become familiar with many well-written, diverse and meaningful works of literature.” (LCS Charter)

According to E.D. Hirsch Jr., one of the reasons children lag behind in their reading ability, and are thus prevented from achieving mature literacy, is a huge vocabulary deficit. Hirsch advises, and Liberty advocates, time devoted to activities that “foster vocabulary, domain knowledge, and fluency.” Domain knowledge is the threshold level of knowledge needed to understand a topic. If one knows nothing of the game of baseball, for example, one can’t comprehend the sentence: “Jones sacrificed and knocked in a run.” The more domain knowledge acquired, the easier it becomes to read and understand a wider variety of material. Hirsch suggests, “Such knowledge could be conveyed through read-alouds, well-conceived vocabulary instruction, and a variety of cumulative activities that immerse children in word and world knowledge.”

In today's schools, the teaching of the kind of specific knowledge needed to become a fully literate individual, is woefully inadequate. The texts and literature used in most American elementary schools are, for the most part, of a trivial nature. There is no shortage of material on topics like pets and sharing, but little on history, geography, and science. At Liberty, vocabulary and domain knowledge are developed by teaching the rich body of content knowledge defined in the Core Knowledge Sequence. Vocabulary is further developed through Greek roots and Latin language instruction.

Finally, in order to immerse students in word knowledge and expose them to many well-written, diverse and meaningful works of literature, we have supplemented the Core Knowledge Sequence with (primarily) classic works of fiction – stories which have withstood the test of time. In accordance with Liberty's Charter, *"The literature suggested by the Core Knowledge Sequence, as well as other literature that will be introduced, is chosen not only for its place in the core body of knowledge, its multi-cultural representation, and its rich use of language, but also because it provides access to deeper meaning of universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy children's minds."*

Additions to the Core Knowledge literature sequence, recommended read-aloud lists for primary grades, required reading lists for 4th-9th grades, and K-9 summer reading lists have been developed by the faculty and Academic Advisory Committee and approved by the Board. The books on these lists were selected with consideration to exposing children to literature that they might not otherwise encounter. The books are intended to nudge students toward higher levels, not just in matters of syntax and vocabulary, but also in sophistication of plot, character development, conflict and resolution, and the sustained reading of lengthy works rather than simply excerpts. Teachers should become familiar with the books on the lists for their grades so that they can assist students in selecting books according to student interest and ability.

Moral Literacy

At Liberty, character education is achieved through a coherent program of expectations, modeling, and study of historical and literary figures. Stories, poems, essays and other writings in our curriculum are intended to help children achieve moral literacy. That achievement involves recognizing the virtues (e.g. honesty, compassion, integrity, perseverance, courage, citizenship), understanding what they are in practice; and developing a desire to do what is right. How is this accomplished?

First, literacy gives children specific moral reference points. Literature and history are rich in moral literacy. Children need specific illustration of what is good and bad so that what is morally right and wrong can be known and promoted. Through the power of imagination children become vicarious participants in a story; they share in a hero's choices and challenges and identify with his suffering and triumph. Because a child's allegiances are based not so much on right versus wrong, but on who arouses his sympathy and who his antipathy, it is important to choose stories in which virtue wins over vice, as in fairy tales and other classic works. Frequent and strong identification with virtuous and victorious heroes allow children to rehearse and strengthen their commitment to goodness.

Second, reading and literacy promote fascination. Nothing compares with a story that begins "Once upon a time..." The imaginative process gives us hope because we want to believe that in the stories of our lives we too can make the right choices. Stories help us to make sense out of our lives. A plot. A purpose. A sense that our struggles have meaning.

Third, reading and literacy create a living link to our culture, its history and traditions.

Fourth, by teaching a domain knowledge, children will become a part of a common world, a community of moral persons. Reading affords us the opportunity to do what we can't often do in life - to become thoroughly involved in the inner lives of others. As with visiting foreign cultures, the sustained involvement with a character in a story enlarges a child's sympathies and gives them those broad, wholesome and charitable views that are the reward of both travel and reading. This involvement is not simply the sharing of adventures, but also of ideas, emotions, loyalties, and principles.

"...Shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up? We cannot...Anything received into the mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts..." PLATO's Republic

Application of Liberty's Reading & Literacy Program

- In addition to regular homework assignments, each student should read or be read to every day.
- Teachers will set expectations for reading homework for grades K-3.
- Older students are required to read literature for homework as follows:

4th - 6th grades - at least 20 minutes per night

7th - 9th grades - at least 30 minutes per night

- If required reading is not assigned from the Core Knowledge Sequence or the approved additions to the Sequence, students shall select books from the approved reading lists for their grade(s). Required reading is limited to the approved reading lists in order to ensure that the principles of this policy are fulfilled.
- Students may submit suggestions for additions to the reading lists to their teachers or the Headmaster for consideration and possible approval.
- Students are encouraged to read additional books of their own choosing over and above the required reading. Parents are encouraged to steer their children toward selections which support this policy and the school's Literature Acquisition policy.
- All students are required to participate in the school's summer reading program. Teachers will set accountability measures to ensure students complete the summer reading.

Supporting References

- Liberty Common School Charter Application, October 1, 1996
- LCS K-3rd Grade Recommended Reading List
- LCS 4th Grade Reading List
- LCS 5th – 6th Grade Reading List
- LCS Upper School Reading List
- LCS Summer Reading List
- *The Vocabulary Deficit* by Andrew Wolfe, The New York Sun, May 2, 2003
- *The Book of Virtues*, William Bennett
- *On Learning to Read* by Bruno Bettelheim
- *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim
- *Books that Build Character* by William Kilpatrick
- *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* by William Kilpatrick
- *Why Johnny Can't Read* by Rudolf Flesch
- *Beginning to Read* by Marilyn Jager Adams
- *Honey for a Child's Heart* by Gladys Hunt
- *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman
- *The Disappearance of Childhood* by Neil Postman
- *The New Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease
- *The Plug-In Drug* by Marie Winn
- Core Knowledge Newsletter

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