

# Core Knowledge Philosophy

## ***Every Child Deserves Equal Access to Common Knowledge***

The Core Knowledge Foundation is dedicated to the mission expressed in our motto—*educational excellence and equity for all children*. To make that mission a reality we offer detailed help and materials to schools, teachers and parents; and effective advocacy grounded in scientific research to citizens and policy makers. We believe that every person in a diverse democratic society deserves equal access to the common knowledge base that draws together its people, while recognizing our differing traditions and contributions. We believe that offering universal access to this shared knowledge is a primary duty of schooling, critical to literacy, and to the closing of the achievement gap between ethnic and racial groups. Most important of all, we believe that shared knowledge, a shared narrative, and shared ideals of liberty and tolerance are indispensable ingredients for effective citizenship and for the perpetuation of our democratic institutions.



## The Ideas that Drive Our Work

In all of its publishing, support and advocacy work, the Core Knowledge Foundation is guided by the following principles:

- Our work is not driven by ideology, but logically by science, history, and research.
- For the sake of academic excellence, greater equity, and higher literacy, elementary and middle schools need to teach a coherent, cumulative, and content-specific core curriculum.
- The persistent gap in reading achievement in U.S. schools can never be reduced until the knowledge gap is reduced. And the knowledge gap will not be reduced unless broad, rich content knowledge is integrated into the many hours devoted to language arts instruction.
- We recognize that every school and community is different, and each student and teacher has individual interests and strengths. Schools teaching the Core Knowledge curriculum should still have ample time over the course of the school year to address any additional state or local requirements not reflected in the *Core Knowledge Sequence*.
- An effective curriculum must be coupled with effective teaching. We believe teaching excellence requires a mastery of subject matter, as well as the ability to engage students, build language competency, use assessment to drive instruction, scaffold instruction to meet individual needs, and provide targeted feedback to students to further shape their learning.

*We need to see the reading comprehension problem for what it primarily is—a knowledge problem. There is no way around the need for children to gain broad general knowledge in order to gain broad general proficiency in reading.*

—E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

# Why Knowledge Matters

Is it really important that kids know things? Shouldn't they just learn to think?

It's natural to assume that teaching lots of "stuff" isn't important anymore when students can simply Google anything they need to know. But you probably take for granted how much "walking-around knowledge" you carry inside your head—and how much it helps you. If you have a rich base of background knowledge, it's easier to learn more. And it's much harder to read with comprehension, solve problems and think critically if you don't.

The idea that we have to choose between knowledge and thinking skills is a false choice. Kids need both. "The richer the knowledge base, the more smoothly and effectively cognitive processes — the very ones that teachers target — operate," notes University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham. "So, the more knowledge students accumulate the smarter they become."

An education grounded in shared knowledge of history, science, art and music is also the great equalizer. The Core Knowledge Foundation believes that for the sake of academic excellence, greater equity, and higher literacy, elementary and middle schools need to teach a coherent, cumulative, and content-specific core curriculum.

*Our society cannot afford a two-tiered system in which the affluent have access to a superior education, while everyone else is subjected to a dull and incoherent classroom experience. Academic excellence, educational equity and fairness demand a strong foundation of knowledge for all learners.* — E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

## Coherent

The **Core Knowledge Sequence** is predicated on the realization that what children are able to learn at any given moment depends on what they already know—and, equally important, that what they know is a function of previous experience and teaching. Although current events and technology are constantly changing, there is a body of lasting knowledge and skills that form the core of a strong preschool–grade 8 curriculum. Explicit identification of what children should learn at each grade level ensures a coherent approach to building knowledge across all grade levels. Every child should learn the fundamentals of science, basic principles of government, important events in world history, essential elements of mathematics, widely acknowledged masterpieces of art and music from around the world, and stories and poems passed down from generation to generation.

## Cumulative

The **Core Knowledge Sequence** provides a clear outline of content to be learned grade by grade so that knowledge, language, and skills build cumulatively from year to year. This sequential building of knowledge not only helps ensure that children enter each new grade ready to learn, it also helps prevent the repetitions and gaps that so often characterize current education. No more repeated units in multiple years on the rain forest, with little or no attention to the Bill of Rights, world geography, or exposure to other cultures. Core Knowledge sets high expectations for all children that are achievable

thanks to the cumulative, sequential way that knowledge and skills build. Teachers in Core Knowledge schools have assurance that children will emerge well prepared with a shared body of knowledge and skills.

## Content-Specific

A typical state or district curriculum says, “Students will demonstrate knowledge of people, events, ideas, and movements that contributed to the development of the United States.” But which people and events? Which ideas and movements? The *Sequence* is distinguished by its specificity. By clearly specifying important knowledge in language arts, history, geography, math, science, and the fine arts, the *Sequence* presents a practical answer to the question, “What do our children need to know?” Teachers are free to devote their energies and efforts to creatively planning how to teach the content to the children in their classrooms.

# Core Knowledge Reading Room

## The Case for a Content-Rich Curriculum

### **Building Knowledge: The Case for Bringing Content into the Language Arts Block and for a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum Core for All Children**

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

*American Educator*, Spring 2006

Knowledge of content and the vocabulary acquired through learning about content are fundamental to successful reading comprehension; without broad knowledge, children's reading comprehension will not improve and their test scores will not budge upwards either. Yet content is not adequately addressed in American schools, especially in the early grades. None of our current methods attempt to steadily build up children's knowledge—not the empty state and district language arts standards, which rarely mention a specific text or piece of information; not the reading textbooks, which jump from one trivial piece to another; and not the comprehension drills conducted in schools in the long periods of 90-120 minutes devoted to language arts. These all promote the view that comprehension depends on having formal skills rather than broad knowledge.

### **How Knowledge Helps: It Speeds and Strengthens Reading Comprehension, Learning—and Thinking**

By Daniel T. Willingham

*American Educator*, Spring 2006

Acquiring knowledge does for the brain what exercise does for the body: The more you learn, the better your brain functions. Knowledge is not only cumulative, it grows exponentially. So, the more you know, the more easily you learn new things. Knowledge improves your ability to remember new things, and it actually improves the quality and speed of your thinking.

### **Taken for Granted: Why Curriculum Content Is Like Oxygen**

By Carolyn Gosse and Lisa Hansel

*American Educator*, Summer 2014

"A rich curriculum is the necessary precondition for improving schools—and it's essential that students receive it early. Core Knowledge Language Arts is one child-friendly, content-rich program for preschool through third grade that can help teachers begin to build the broad academic knowledge and vocabulary that all children need." In **this vital *American Educator* issue** on "the magic of words," contributors Susan B. Neuman and Tanya S. Wright, Chrys Dougherty, and Ruth Wattenburg further discuss the importance of giving young children the curriculum they deserve.

### **Knowledge at the Core: Don Hirsch, Core Knowledge, and the Future of the Common Core**

Thomas B. Fordham Institute, January 2014

"Children cannot be truly literate without knowing about history, science, art, music, literature, civics, geography, and more." That's the heart of this compendium of essays and companion videos published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. While demonstrating the lack of time devoted to building academic knowledge in the early grades—and the eagerness of elementary grades teachers to spend more time on rich content—*Knowledge at the Core* asks all of us to "commit to implanting a sequential, content-rich curriculum in the country's elementary and middle schools."

### **A Wealth of Words**

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

*City Journal*, Winter 2013

A number of notable books, including Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality* and Timothy Noah's *The Great Divergence*, lay out in disheartening detail the growing inequality of income and opportunity in the United States, along with the decline of the middle class. The aristocracy of family so deplored by Jefferson seems upon us; the counter-aristocracy of merit that long defined America as the land of opportunity has receded. The key to increasing upward mobility is expanding vocabulary.

### **Culture Warrior, Gaining Ground: E. D. Hirsch Sees His Educaion Theories Taking Hold**

*The New York Times*, September 2013

A generation after he was squarely pummeled as elitist, antiquated and narrow-minded, the education theorist E. D. Hirsch Jr. is being dragged back into the ring at the age of 85 — this time for a chance at redemption.

### **E. D. Hirsch, Jr. Interviewed by Toby Young**

July 2013

Core Knowledge's founder, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., shares his vision for cultural literacy as a means of narrowing the achievement gap in America and in England in this special interview with Toby Young.

### **Envisioning a Common Core Curriculum**

*American Educator*, Winter 2012

A special issue of *American Educator* advocated for a common core curriculum. But what should such a curriculum look like? It should be detailed and specific, but not scripted. It should offer extensive support for teaching, such as lesson plans and classroom assessments, but using those supports should not be mandatory. The new *Core Knowledge Language Arts* program for kindergarten through second grades seems to fit that description.

### **The Curriculum Reformation**

By Sol Stern

*City Journal*, Summer 2012

No matter how the debate over Common Core State Standards plays out, one undeniably positive development has resulted from all this. For the first time in almost half a century, education administrators and policymakers around the country are seriously discussing the role of a content-based curriculum in raising student achievement. And that means long-overdue recognition of the ideas of E. D. Hirsch, one of America's greatest but also most neglected education reformers.

### **Core Knowledge Enhanced Reading Skills, Study Finds**

By Anna M. Phillips

*The New York Times*, March 11, 2012

Children in New York City who learned to read using the *Core Knowledge Language Arts* curriculum outperformed those at other schools that used methods that have been encouraged since the Bloomberg administration's early days, according to a new study. For three years, a pilot program tracked the ability of approximately 1,000 students at twenty New York City schools, following them from kindergarten through second grade. Half of the schools adopted a curriculum designed by the education theorist E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s Core Knowledge Foundation. The other 10 used a variety of methods, but most fell under the definition of "balanced literacy," an approach that was spread citywide by former Schools Chancellor, Joel I. Klein, beginning in 2003.

### **There's No Such Thing As a Reading Test**

By E.D. Hirsch, Jr. and Robert Pondiscio

*The American Prospect*, June 13, 2010

Schools and teachers may be making a Herculean effort to raise reading scores, but their efforts can do little to improve reading achievement. This wasted effort is not because our teachers are lazy or of low

quality. Rather, too many of our schools labor under fundamental misconceptions about reading comprehension -- how it works, how to improve it, and how to test it.

### **Teaching Content Is Teaching Reading**

In this YouTube video, University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham describes why content knowledge is essential to reading with comprehension—and why teaching reading strategies alone is not sufficient.

## **Core Knowledge Language Arts Presentations and Articles**

### **More Than Words: An Early Grades Reading Program Builds Skills and Knowledge**

By Jennifer Dubin

*American Educator*, Fall 2012

Using CKLA at P.S. 96 in Queens, New York, students have acquired enough background knowledge in the early grades that, once they are in fourth grade....their teachers ask them to pretend they are Roman soldiers and to describe their lives and responsibilities, or to imagine they are immigrants in America at the turn of the 20th century writing a letter to family members back home. Pencils in hand, the words come quickly. Full of meaning, the sentences reveal the rich content that all our students should know.

### **Core Knowledge Language Arts Overview Presentation (PDF | PPT)**

These slides offer an overview of the background, philosophy, research, components, and trajectory of the Core Knowledge Language Arts program. They may be modified and used for presentations including the CKLA program.

### **PBS Newshour Visits Core Knowledge Language Arts Pilot School** (video)

PBS's John Merrow looks at how Common Core State Standards will change reading instruction in U.S. schools. PS 96 in Queens, NY is among the schools profiled. Says Principal Joyce Barrett-Walker, "When I look at the expectations with Common Core learning standards, we're where we need to be right now!"

### **Teaching Kids to Read**

By Ted Hirsch

The pleasures that come with teaching children to read are hard to match, and that is why so many of us keep teaching children in the youngest grades. We want to be a part of the magical process whereby children first learn how to turn letter symbols into meaningful language. Literacy is the single most important skill children learn at school. By means of literacy, children expand their world and enter any subject or realm on earth. But they must first master the skill of translating visual symbols into speech sounds.

### **When Two Vowels Go Walking**

*Common Knowledge*, 20.3, October 2007

As long as phonics instruction features misleading, ineffective rules like the walking-talking rule, it will be open to criticism from advocates of whole language and whole-word reading. Fortunately, there is no reason why it has to be.

### **Two Ways of Explaining the Listening and Learning Strand**

By Matthew Davis

*Common Knowledge* 20.2, July 2007

What's the point of all this reading aloud? One way to explain it is to say that the Listening & Learning strand is a vocabulary-building program. Written language is richer in vocabulary than spoken language. By reading these stories aloud to children, teachers will be able to expose children to many words they would probably not hear in everyday conversation.

### **'Ph' is for Phonics: The Great Decoding Debate**

By Matthew Davis

*Common Knowledge* 20.1, January 2007

For many years science had very few decisive conclusions regarding the great debate in reading instruction. In recent decades, however, scientific findings have begun to accumulate, and the results indicate that both phonics and phonemic awareness instruction have a strong positive effect on reading achievement and that several of the key assumptions of the whole-word and whole-language movements are unwarranted.

### **The Simple View of Reading**

By Matthew Davis

*Common Knowledge* 19.2, October 2006

Reading is a complicated operation, and yet one of the most widely supported models of reading is surprisingly simple. In fact, it is known as "the simple view of reading." This view, which is associated with Philip Gough, William Tunmer, and other reading researchers, holds that there are two chief elements that are equally important to reading comprehension. One is decoding skills and the other is language comprehension ability.

### **"Green Eggs and Ham: Or The Case for Phonics Instruction and Decodable Text,"**

By Matthew Davis

*Common Knowledge* 19.1, July 2006

How much does a beginning reader need to know about English letter-sound correspondences to read an easy children's book? More than you might think.