

Research-Based Support for Schoolwide's Testing Fundamentals Program

Introduction

Testing Fundamentals is a research-based program specifically designed to explicitly and systematically teach the skills and strategies students need to increase their performances on standardized tests. It uses high quality children's literature to focus on the types of questions students will be required to answer on these tests. Beginning with teacher modeling that focuses on comprehension strategies that are accomplished by thinking aloud, Testing Fundamentals then provides multiple opportunities for guided and independent practice to reinforce the skills and strategies that are being taught. In addition, we focus on *beating the test* by teaching students test-taking strategies and how to recognize tricks and traps. We also have important components to support struggling readers and invite reflection by both students and teachers. Our program also provides practice tests that are closely aligned with state tests and that focus on the skills and strategies the students have learned.

Research Finding #1

"A reader reads a text to understand what is read, to construct memory representations of what is understood, and to put this understanding to use. A reader can read a text to learn, find out information, or to be entertained. These various purposes of understanding require that the reader use knowledge of the world, including language and print. This knowledge enables the reader to make meaning of the text, to form memory representations of these meanings, and to use them to communicate with others information about what was being read" (Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read, 2000, pp. 4-39).

Testing Fundamentals

Our program focuses on teaching students the skills and strategies they need to comprehend text and to be able to effectively communicate their understanding in a multiple-choice test format. Testing Fundamentals recognizes that the most effective test preparation is accomplished by explicitly and systematically teaching comprehension skills and strategies, and then aligning this comprehension knowledge with the types of questions students are asked to answer on state reading tests.

Students need to focus on constructing both literal and inferential meaning from texts. This is taught through the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) where the teacher first models, then provides guided practice, and then provides opportunities for independent practice.

Research Finding #2

Gambrell and Mazzoni (1999) identified that research-based practices include teaching reading for authentic meaning-making experiences, using high quality literature, using multiple texts, giving students significant amounts of time to read, giving students explicit instruction in comprehension and figuring out words, and balancing direct instruction with guided instruction and independent reading.

Testing Fundamentals

Our program uses all the research-based practices identified above. We use lots of high quality literature to directly teach comprehension and word study skills and strategies. We build in lots of time for reading that includes both guided and independent practice. We know that teaching students to be *good readers* will make them successful test takers.

Students need to be directly taught how to read for meaning in authentic high quality literature in both fiction and nonfiction and they need lots of opportunities for guided and independent practice.

Research Finding #3

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), a major research-based report from the National Research Council, identified that successful readers are able to summarize major points from fiction and nonfiction texts; discuss underlying themes or messages; and distinguish cause and effect, fact and opinion, main idea, and supporting details.

Testing Fundamentals

Our program focuses on teaching students to be able to do all the comprehension skills noted above in order to apply their understanding on a state reading test.

Students need explicit, systematic instruction to learn how to retell and summarize a story, identify the main idea that is supported by important information, identify an important message or lesson that is being communicated, and recognize relationships between cause and effect.

Research Finding #4

Reid Lyon, former Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) wrote, "In general, if children can read the words on a page accurately and fluently, they will be able to construct meaning on two levels. At the first level, literal understanding is achieved. However, constructing meaning requires far more than literal comprehension. Children must eventually guide themselves through text by asking the questions such as... 'Do I understand what the author is saying, and why?'" (Lyon, 1998).

Testing Fundamentals

Our program teaches children to comprehend at both the literal level and the understanding level. We use a developmental approach that begins with teaching students to figure out word meanings in order to read with accuracy. This is followed by teaching students how to identify literal information in the text. We then focus on teaching students to answer inferential questions and answer questions that focus on determining importance.

Students need to be immersed in all aspects of reading that enable them to accurately read text, identify literal information, make inferences, and determine importance.

Research Finding #5

Fountas & Pinnell (2001) identified four key components to effectively prepare students for state tests: Analyze the underlying skills students need, create ongoing curricula to provide a foundation for good test-taking performances, analyze the test format in order to teach students how they will need to represent their knowledge, and familiarize students with the skills they will need to apply on the test and the ways in which they will need to display their knowledge.

Testing Fundamentals

Our program directly addresses the four components noted above. We have identified the essential skills students need and provide ongoing curricula to teach those skills. We have also analyzed state tests to identify how students will need to represent their knowledge and provide students with lots of practice to prepare them.

Students need to learn essential skills and strategies to become good readers. They also need to learn to represent their knowledge in a variety of ways in order to be successful on tests and throughout life.

Research Finding #6

Guthrie (2002) reported that “general reading competence is by far the most important single factor for success on a high stakes test” (p. 375). He further reported, “Next in importance are the two factors motivation and test-wiseness” (p. 375).

Testing Fundamentals

Our program strongly supports the factors noted above for teaching students to be successful on reading tests. We motivate students to learn by using high quality literature and a socially interactive process to explicitly teach them to be good readers. We also teach students to be *test-wise* by explicitly teaching them test-taking strategies and making them aware of the *tricks and traps* on tests that could cause confusion.

Motivating students to read by providing authentic, meaningful, socially interactive reading experiences creates reading engagement. This enables the teacher to explicitly teach students the skills and strategies they need to become successful lifelong readers as well as successful test takers.

Research Finding #7

The major research study *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Anderson et al., 1985) reported that “test wise” students develop test-taking strategies that enable them to improve their scores. They further reported that “learning to read appears to involve close knitting of reading skills that complement and support one another, rather than learning one skill, adding a second, then a third, and so on” (p. 97).

Testing Fundamentals

Our program supports the findings noted above by emphasizing both the integration of reading skills and the teaching of test-taking strategies. We teach students skills and strategies they need to be successful readers in life, and then we explicitly teach ways that they will need to represent their knowledge on a state test.

Students need to be taught to read by using an integrated approach that emphasizes word knowledge, comprehension skills and strategies, problem-solving strategies (such as figuring out word meanings), and self-monitoring for meaning. This approach, along with the teaching of test-taking strategies, leads to improving student performances on a state test.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the Commission on Reading*. Washington, DC: The National Institute of Education.
- Fountas, I.C., & Pinnell, G.S. (2001). *Guiding readers and writers grades 3–6: Teaching comprehension, genre, and content literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gambrell, L.B., & Mazzoni, S.A. (1999). Principles of best practice: Finding the common ground. In L.B. Gambrell, L.M. Morrow, S.B. Neuman, & M. Pressley, *Best practices in literacy instruction*. New York: Guilford.
- Guthrie, J.T. (2002). Preparing students for high-stakes test taking in reading. In A.E. Farstrup and S.J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction*. (3rd ed.). (pp. 370–391). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Lyon, G.R. (1998). Overview of reading and literacy research. In S. Patton and M. Holmes (Eds.), *The keys to literacy*. Washington, DC: Council for Basic Education.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. (NIH Publication 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Snow, C.E., Burns, S.M., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.