A No-Nonsense Guide to “Teacher Talk”

Maybe it was a glance at your child’s weekly school schedule, or perhaps she arrived at home repeating an unfamiliar term her teacher used in the classroom. You may have wondered... So, here is a guide to some often-used “school words”.

**Standards-based** Standards are a list of the skills, concepts, and abilities (what one knows and is able to do) that a typical student has command of by the end of each grade level. All units, lessons, and tests – even our report cards – spring from these standards. In Salem (and most other US school districts) nearly all of our work is based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). For details go to [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

**Workshop model** Salem’s reading and writing classes in grades K-8 are structured using the workshop model. As the term suggests, these classes are humming with activity. Teachers open the class with a focus lesson, or teaching point. This is brief but intense and always connected to the previous day’s work. When all students are ready, they are sent off (with a clear purpose) to work. As kids are engaged in the challenging, wonderful work of reading & writing - alone, with a partner, or in a small group - the teacher is very busy as well. The teacher is a coach - providing all manner of support and assistance to students (again, individually or in groups). Near the class period’s end, students are called back together for a quick conclusion of the session. Questions are answered, work is shared, and accomplishment is celebrated.

**Word study** Word Study has been described as the, “… systematic exploration of letters, sounds, and words and learning how oral and written language ‘works’”. At the start of the ‘19-‘20 school year, Salem’s elementary students will be introduced to new curricula. Grades 3 & 4, for example, will use the Fountas & Pinnell Word Study System during daily lessons.

**Assessment** Assessment is the use of many tools (both formal and informal) to document or show what a student knows and is able to do. Tests are just one form of assessment. The results of any test or task given to a group fall within a range of success – think of rungs on a ladder. Assessment, used properly, shows the way up the ladder. The goal - always - is progress, or growth. Assessment is a beginning, not an end.

- **Pre-assessments & post-assessments** New learning is built on the foundation of what is already known. Gaining new knowledge often requires the mastery of earlier fundamental skills. Pre-assessments are given at the beginning of units (particularly literacy) to see if students know what they need to in order to conquer new learning. If not, review and more teaching are needed. Post-assessments happen at the end of units to gauge students’ understanding of the topic. Those results too, may likely lead to further teaching.

- **i-Ready tests** Three times a year, in September, January, and May, students use classroom laptops to take both reading and math tests. These tests pinpoint individualized, specific areas of strength and need. Also, the autumn tests give a baseline, or starting point, against which mid-year (January) and year-end (May) growth can be measured. Each test can usually be completed in little more than a class period, and the results are valuable.

- **NH SAS tests** For many years now, most schools throughout the country have participated in end-of-year testing (math, reading, & writing) that is based on the learning expectations of the Common Core State Standards. Every spring, Salem students take tests developed and administered within the New Hampshire State-wide Assessment System (NH-SAS).
Benchmarking
By paying very close attention and noting errors during a student’s reading & discussion of a very short book (either fiction or nonfiction), teachers gain key information about the child’s ability to read and understand text. The books are leveled (or matched to a particular time within a grade). For example Level R is about where a typical fourth grader would be reading in March. A student’s success (or struggle) reading the text helps identify a level of achievement, as well as skills in need of improvement. Repeating this process two or three times during the year shows one’s progress over time. Finally, benchmarking identifies three specific levels of text for each student: what can be read independently with success, what poses a healthy challenge, and what is simply too difficult. During the benchmarking sessions, students read “mini-books” on topics of high interest. They tend to enjoy the chance to chat with their teacher about their reading.

Eureka Math
The Eureka Math program, new to Salem this school year, is the textbook and support materials used in all elementary classrooms. While books and papers may have a different look, Salem students’ math work is still guided by the expectations of the Common Core State Standards. For more information, https://greatminds.org/math

ST Math
ST Math is a math software program based on games and puzzles that start off simply and get more challenging as a student progresses. The goal of ST Math is to develop problem solving skills in an interactive, engaging way. Depending on their grade level, students will work on ST Math between 60 -90 minutes every week. Kids are expected to log in from home too. Adapted from www.mindresearch.org

Literacy Units of Study
Lucy Calkins is widely regarded as one of the county’s foremost experts on children’s literacy. As founder of the Teachers College Readers and Writers Program, she has visited countless classrooms and trained teachers throughout the United States. Salem’s reading and writing work is based on the resources she has developed. These tools, Writing Units of Study and Reading Units of Study have been the cornerstone of our literacy work in grades K-6 for many years.

Content Block
This block is an hour of each day that is mostly dedicated to science and social studies. The block offers consistent yet flexible time for these key subjects. Project Lead the Way (PLTW), a hands-on, highly interactive STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) program, is a major component of our work. Tech integrators lead the class through at least one unit (computer science in fourth grade); classroom teachers facilitate the rest. We continue efforts to blend social studies and literacy. For example, fourth graders learn about the American Revolution. They’ll also create an impressive, multi-chapter nonfiction book on the topic.

Intervention/Reading Support time
Every teacher at Fisk School has a 30-minute block set aside each day for reading support. During this time, some students may receive assistance from specialists such as resource room or Title One staff who offer individual or small group help. Students who are supported during this block know that they will NOT be missing any classroom lessons or instruction. This “catch-up” time also gives teachers more opportunity to work closely with individuals or small groups of learners.