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Defining Literacy

The International Literacy Association defines literacy as “the ability to read, write, and communicate” (www.literacyworldwide.org), with communication defined as the ability to listen and speak. Visual literacy, or viewing, that is, the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, is often included in a broader definition of literacy. Critical literacy includes learners' abilities to analyze ideas, effect social change, and empower themselves to make a difference in their own and in others' lives (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards). In the Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening (2011), the Pennsylvania State Code defines literacy as:

“The language arts, Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening, are unique because they are processes that students use to learn and make sense of their world. Students do not read “reading;” they read about history, science, mathematics, and other content areas as well as topics that interest and entertain them. Similarly, students do not write “writing;” they use written words to express their knowledge and ideas and to inform or entertain others. Because of the unique nature of the language arts, all teachers in a school use Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening...[to] assist their students in learning them through multiple classroom situations in all the subject areas.” (§ 4.83)

Although many dictionaries define literacy as the ability to read and write, the definition of literacy has evolved and expanded over the past several decades. As summarized by Bean & Ippolito (2016), the following major shifts in our understanding of literacy are influencing literacy instruction in schools:

- Need for an integrated view of literacy, given the recognition of the interrelationships between and among all literacy skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking);
- Understanding that literacy has an impact on learning in all classrooms and that it is a foundation for all learning;



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- Importance of a comprehensive, systematic literacy program in schools from the early stages of learning through high school;
- Importance of supporting students in using both print and digital text in a critical and effective manner;
- Role of both general academic and discipline-specific vocabulary in helping students read effectively and to learn new, unfamiliar concepts; and
- Need for a combination of fiction and informational texts from early grades through high school.

In summary, in the 21st century, literacy includes the ability to locate, evaluate, use, and communicate through a wide range of resources including text, visual, audio, and video sources. In other words, literate individuals demonstrate independence; build strong content knowledge; respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; use technology and digital media strategically and capably; and come to understand other perspectives and cultures (Common Core State Standards, 2010).

To develop individuals with such 21st century literacies requires instruction that is integrated and helps students understand how to access, evaluate, synthesize, and contribute to information (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2013). To ensure academic success, such instruction must occur in the context of all academic disciplines and is the responsibility of all teachers.