Pending the approval of the Maine Legislature, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English-Language Arts will replace our current ELA standards. This edition of Literacy Links is the third in a series of editions describing aspects of the CCSS for ELA.

**Spotlight on…**

**Common Core State Standards for ELA: Text Complexity**

In the October 2010 edition of Literacy Links, the Reading Standard strand of the Common Core State Standards was reviewed. “One of the key requirements of the CCSS for Reading is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school. By the time they complete the core, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers” (Appendix A of CCSS, pg. 2). Why does text complexity matter? What factors influence text complexity? How is text complexity measured? What resources exist in the CCSS to support educators understanding and selection of increasingly complex text? Let’s take a look at some answers to these questions.

**Why does text complexity matter?**

Research conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress as early as 1985 identified that the complexity of text passages is one of the most important factors that influences reading comprehension (NAEP, 1985). In 2006, ACT, Inc. released a report with findings that showed which skills differentiated the students who exceeded the benchmark scores on the reading section of the ACT college admissions test from those that did not. Of particular interest was the finding that it wasn’t students’ ability to infer or answer questions about main ideas, but instead their ability to answer questions about complex texts. This research points to the need to not only engage in pedagogy that focuses on critical thinking skills, but to do so with complex texts. Additionally, research over the past 40 years indicates that while the demands of college, career, and citizenship have held steady or increased, the complexity of texts K-12 students are required to read has decreased, and independent reading of complex text is not happening often enough, particularly with expository texts (Chall, et al, 1977; Hayes, et al, 1996; Williamson, 2006; Heller and Greenleaf, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). If students are unprepared for the cognitive demand of complex text, they will not be equipped to be successful with the types of text they will face in post-secondary education, in their future careers, or as informed citizens.

**What factors influence text complexity?**

A variety of factors influence text complexity, and it is how these factors interact, as well as how well readers navigate those factors, that determines the degree of complexity with regard to specific texts. “For example, a text that has short simple sentences may, nevertheless, be challenging to read/comprehend when it contains abstract ideas, unfamiliar concepts, and high levels of interpretation” (Hess and Biggam, 2004). Hess and Biggam describe a number of factors that can influence text complexity, including:

- Word Difficulty (vocabulary) and Language Structure (sentence type)
- Text Structure (i.e. problem-solution; chronology; sequence; etc.)
- Discourse Style (i.e. satire, humor)
- Genre and Features of the Text
- Background Knowledge for Content
- Level of Reasoning Required (i.e. sophistication of themes and ideas)
- Format and Layout of Text
- Length of Text
Online Instructional Resources...

The following online articles and web-resources provide opportunities for literacy educators to become increasing familiar with multiple factors that influence text complexity. These sources were found online by searching “Text Complexity in Reading”

www.ncliea.org/publications/TextComplexity_KH05.pdf
This article, A discussion of “Increasing Text Complexity” (2004) by Karin Hess and Sue Biggam outlines “factors that interact to influence text complexity” and is found as a appendix to the NECAP Reading GLEs K-8 (updated 2005). Text complexity factors are presented for each of the following grade spans: end of grade 1, end of grade 2, grades 3-4, grades 5-6, and grades 7-12.

www.achieve.org/node/946
This pdf document, found under the topic of ‘understanding text complexity’, provides English and Communication Benchmarks, 4-12 outlined by Achieve, Inc (2008) using materials from multiple sources including NAEP and ACT.

http://lexile.com
This website at lexile.com: The Lexile Framework for Reading: Matching Readers to Texts offers several resources for teachers as they learn more about the Common Core State Standards and “Text Complexity Grade bands and Lexile Bands”. Users can access this information at the following web-link: