A black heart on a white background

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Dear Families and Caregivers,

As teachers, we are always looking for ways to refine our practice so we can better serve our students. Recently, we have been following a body of research referred to as the “science of reading” to help us better understand how children learn to read.

In the past, we believed that if students simply saw a word enough times, they would learn it. We taught students their sight words (words we wanted them to read automatically, accurately and effortlessly) through rote memorization as “chunks.” If you have older children you may recall word lists we sent home for them study and memorize, and/or flashcard we asked you to drill with them.

While this method worked for some students, it did not work for all. We know there have always been far too many students who struggle to remember new words, even after many exposures. The science of reading is now helping us understand why.

It turns out that there is a specific mental process we use to permanently store words for immediate retrieval. This process is called Orthographic Mapping. It is how we take an unfamiliar word and immediately turn it into a sight word. For this mental process to take place, students need direct instruction on how to connect sounds to the written word.

Backed with this knowledge, we recently made the decision to change the way we teach our students high-frequency sight words. No longer will we rely on memorization. Instead, we will integrate high-frequency sight words into our phonics lessons using the **Heart Word Method.**

To help you understand this method of teaching, it is useful to know that we categorize high-frequency sight words into two groups – **regularly spelled** and **irregularly spelled.**

**Regularly spelled** high-frequency words will be taught during the phonics unit with the corresponding skill. These words can be decoded (sounded out) using common phonics knowledge and letter-sound relationships. Of the 220 high-frequency Dolch words, 63% of them fall into this category.

High-frequency words that are **irregularly spelled** are now referred to as **Heart Words.** You may have heard them being called trick or puzzle words. These words are unique because they have tricky parts that students must be explicitly taught. We refer to this part of the word as the “heart part” and mark it with a heart. Of the 220 Dolch high-frequency words, 37% of them are heart words and will require direct instruction in order for students to properly learn them.

An example of a heart word is the word, said. Students can usually identify the beginning and ending sounds (/s/ and /d/), but the middle sound they hear is a short e, and they often spell the word s-e-d. The “heart part” or the tricky part in this word is the “ai.” With the Heart Word Method, students receive explicit phonics instruction to learn that in the word said we spell the short e sound with the letters “ai.” This is the part of the word that they must learn by heart.

Science tells us that the best practice for teaching students to read and write involves having students recognize the sound-symbol correlation for each word. When students encounter an unknown word in reading or writing, they should attempt to sound it out and use their sound-symbol knowledge to read or write the word. When we teach students to memorize words as “chunks” without making these sound-symbol connections, we are doing the opposite of this proven practice.

While this approach may look different from what you have seen or experienced in the past, you can feel confident knowing it is backed by science. We are excited to apply what we have learned to better serve your children. We can’t wait to see how providing more explicit phonics instruction will help them to grow as readers, writers and spellers!

Thank you! Please let me know if you have any questions –

Liz Jacobs, Literacy Coach

Dolch Words:

<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/siteassets/schools/elementary-schools/a-c/collegegardenses/uploadedfiles/classrooms/grade2/sightwords.pdf>

Reading Rockets, “A New Model for Teaching High-Frequency Words” by Linda Farrell, Michael Hunter and Tina Osenga

<https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/phonics-and-decoding/articles/new-model-teaching-high-frequency-words>

\*adapted from Christina Winter, Leadersofliteracy.com