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Group Issues Standards On Speaking, Listening For Preschool to 3rd Grade

By David J. Hoff

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Elementary schools and preschools need to foster children's conversational and listening skills as they teach them to read and write, a national group urges in a new set of standards.

"It's clear on the face of it that one must learn to speak and listen before one learns to read and write," said Marc S. Tucker, a co-director of New Standards, which released the guide here last week.

"Speaking and Listening for Preschool Through Third Grade," explains what schools should do to help students master oral language while teaching them about written language.

New Standards argues that encouraging students to converse about topics at length helps them understand what's been said, respond to the conversation, and discuss what they see and read in books.

The publication includes standards for preschool, kindergarten and 1st grade, and 2nd and 3rd grades. At each level, it says, teachers should be trying to develop the same fundamental skills, such as discussing books, using language to accomplish something, and understanding the etiquette of conversation.

Laying Groundwork

Starting in preschool, for example, children should be able to recount two or more events in a narrative, the standards say. By 3rd grade, they should be able to retell a story they've heard, including details of the original version.

All the skills in the standards are necessary if students are

going to become proficient readers by the time they finish 3rd grade, say researchers who helped write the 276-page document.

"If raising reading achievement is the ultimate goal, then we have to start with language," said Catherine A. Snow, a professor at Harvard University's graduate school of education. "We don't have the mechanism for tending to oral-language skills as part of the curriculum in schools," she said.

The panel that wrote the standards included Ms. Snow; Lauren B. Resnick, a co-director of New Standards; Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, President Bush's choice to head the Department of Education's research arm; and Jerlean Daniel, an associate professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh.

New Standards is a joint project of the Washington-based National Center for Education and the Economy, which Mr. Tucker heads, and the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center, which Ms. Resnick leads.

Many states include oral skills in their language arts standards, but none is as comprehensive as New Standards suggests, according to one state official.

"There's not as much on this topic in the field as there is in other areas," said Cheryl Z. Tibbals, the director of the state leadership center for the Council of Chief State School Officers. "This could make a contribution."

FOLLOW-UP: The book and four CD-ROMs are available for \$45, plus \$3.60 shipping and handling, from New Standards, 1 Thomas Circle N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005; (888) 361-6233.