



# PIONEER VALLEY BOOKS



## **Publisher Response to the IMRA Review Committee Findings**

Pioneer Valley Books would like to thank the Texas Education Agency and Safal Partners for their work in providing a thorough and insightful review of *Stepping Together*. We are excited by our 100% alignment to the phonics TEKS and are grateful for all the positive feedback presented in the final product reports.

### **Company Overview**

Pioneer Valley Books is a small family-owned business that for more than 25 years has been providing high-quality early literacy materials designed by teachers for teachers. The company was founded by a small group of experienced educators and literacy experts who wanted to give early readers access to high-quality, engaging books. Our team is dedicated to producing evidence-based curricula aligned with the latest research, and we are firmly committed to ensuring that our resources boost teacher performance in the classroom and include high-quality books that students are excited about and look forward to reading. Our goal has always been to help all students become joyful readers who just can't wait to read another book.

### **Program Overview**

*Stepping Together* is a research-based K–2 interactive reading program that provides a classroom community with a daily opportunity to read increasingly more challenging grade-level text with the support of a teacher. The goal of each lesson is to build students'

literacy skills while also fostering a love of reading and a deeper understanding of the text. As a supplemental foundational skills program, *Stepping Together* is an excellent addition to any core curriculum (K–2) to fill in any gaps in key instructional areas: phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and/or comprehension. Students gain the benefits of whole-group learning, including equitable exposure to the same high-quality instruction, a baseline for learning goals and assessment, authentic peer-to-peer conversations, and the building of a strong community in the classroom. *Stepping Together* is 100% aligned to the phonics TEKS. Scope and sequence charts showing the concepts taught in each lesson and the TEKS and ELPS alignment are available in the teaching guides for each grade level.

### *Intentional Instructional Design*

*Stepping Together* includes a teaching guide, lesson modules, and downloadable resources for each grade level. The teaching guide includes a scope and sequence, comprehensive unit overviews, and suggested pacing and resources to support administrators and instructional coaches with implementation. The lesson modules provide lesson overviews, content knowledge and academic vocabulary for effective teaching, and comprehensive, detailed lesson plans that include questions, suggested teacher language, and instructional assessments. The downloadable resources include materials to support families and caregivers in their students' success.



### *Progress Monitoring*

*Stepping Together* includes a variety of instructional assessments at the unit and lesson level, including formative and summative assessments that are aligned to the TEKS. Weekly progress monitoring and summative assessments ensure progress is tracked and supports differentiation in instruction to meet students' needs. Tables are conveniently included in the teaching guides to show TEKS alignment. The assessments include varying levels of complexity and question types. Resources are also provided to guide teachers in responding to student performance. These robust assessments and resources give teachers the information they need to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students. Student Data Trackers are also included to involve students in goal setting and progress monitoring.

### *Supports for All Learners*

The materials in *Stepping Together* guide teachers in supporting all learners. The lesson modules include daily whole-group lessons that support teachers in modeling, explaining, and communicating concepts. Each lesson includes multiple types of practice and a variety of instructional approaches. The teaching guides include recommendations for teachers to differentiate instruction for students who have not yet reached proficiency on grade-level content and skills as well as enrichment and extension activities for students who have demonstrated proficiency. Tips for teaching emerging bilingual students are included for each week's lessons. There are also activities embedded in Literacy Center and Independent Practice to support extended learning and practice throughout the reading instructional period. The lesson overviews and lesson plans include pre-teaching or embedded supports for unfamiliar vocabulary and references in text.

### *Phonics Rule Compliance*

In *Stepping Together*, the development of strong phoneme-grapheme correspondence and decoding/encoding skills is front and center in every lesson. This is reflected in the framework of each grade level, where phonological/phonemic awareness and phonics skills are explicitly taught, modeled, and practiced before reading and writing. *Stepping Together* was designed around systematic and sequenced instruction of foundational skills. Every phonics skill is practiced in isolation and connected to decodable text, with purposeful cumulative review built into the activities. The lessons contain Super Stories that are engaging, decodable texts that include the taught phonics skills. The lessons also contain a variety of engaging phonics activities, including Making Words, Breaking Words, Analogy Charts, and more. Students learn to build, read, and write words.

## *Foundational Skills*

One of the strengths of *Stepping Together* is the variety of activities and resources found in each lesson. Through these activities, students develop, practice, and reinforce foundational skills, including oral language, letter-sound correspondence, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, sound-spelling patterns, high-frequency words, one-syllable and multisyllabic words, and morphological awareness. These varied activities are highly engaging and purposefully designed to support the learning of all students.

## **Program Clarifications**

We would like to clarify several points regarding our instruction.

### **Support for Emergent Bilingual Students**

The framework of instruction in *Stepping Together* is uniquely designed to give all students access to grade-level instruction regardless of their level of English proficiency. *Stepping Together* was also designed with the understanding that not all emergent bilingual students have the same needs or require the same level of support. Because of this, our materials make recommendations and provide resources for supports that allow teachers to make decisions on the best ways to differentiate learning for all students. *Stepping Together* also includes a variety of assessment opportunities that gives teachers the information they need to evaluate student learning and adjust the level and type of supports each student receives.

Steps 1 (Warm Up) and 2 (Phonological Awareness Activity) of Days 1–4 give students time to learn, listen to, and verbally practice the sounds of the English language. Step 3 (Word Study/Phonics Activity) on Days 1–4 gives students time to connect the sounds to the symbols of the English alphabet. Each activity follows the same framework: Introduce the Activity, Model the Activity, and Guided Practice. *Stepping Together* includes visual supports, including word study cards with sound boxes and letter cards, that benefit all students, especially emergent bilingual students.

Step 4 of Days 1–4 is a shared read or interactive writing. Before each new book is read, the lessons contain a book introduction to support teachers in introducing new, unfamiliar concepts to students. Each lesson also contains “Tips for ELL,” which gives teachers recommendations to support emergent bilingual students before, during, and after reading and writing, so that all students can practice reading, writing, and speaking the English language.

## **Explicit Instruction and Corrective Feedback**

*Stepping Together* was designed to support teachers in providing effective instruction for their students. At Pioneer Valley Books, we understand that not all students have the same needs, and for this reason, the lessons are not scripted to the extent that teachers are unable to make adjustments to ensure the success of their students. The lesson modules include the essential information and teacher language teachers need to implement the curriculum effectively. The teaching guides provide more detailed information about the procedure for each activity and how to differentiate and/or provide enrichment based on the needs of their students.

Responsive feedback has an effect size of 0.75 on student achievement. “When students are engaged in appropriately challenging tasks, they are more likely to respond to feedback because they need that information to continue growing and learning” (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016, 23). This can be especially critical for students who struggle. Being responsive to the needs of individual students and their errors in real time plays an important role in their learning and quickly resolves misunderstanding. Effective corrective feedback involves careful observation of students’ responses and errors and should be based on their specific needs and literacy goals. All students do not need the same type of corrective feedback. Moreover, the type of corrective feedback one student needs may change over time as that student’s literacy knowledge advances.

In *Stepping Together*’s whole-group setting, teachers need to manage a wide range of levels of ability. To that end, we provide teachers with the resources they will need to provide corrective feedback that is individualized to each student’s needs and goals. In the appendixes of each grade-level teaching guide (also available for download as an online resource), corrective feedback charts are provided to help teachers provide appropriate responsive feedback during phonological awareness and phonics activities, during shared reading and other reading activities, during the discussion portion of the lesson, and during writing. Feedback is flexible in that it can be used for individual as well as whole-group support. By providing a framework rather than scripted instruction, teachers are encouraged to use the corrective feedback provided as a springboard to make in-the-moment instructional decisions that help move every student’s learning forward.

## **Oral Language Development**

*Stepping Together* includes daily opportunities for oral language development. The reading portion of the lesson includes different shared reading structures (echo, choral, cloze), allowing the teacher to model appropriate pacing, intonation, and expression. Specific teaching points explicitly teach students strategies in phrasing and expression. In addition, *Stepping Together* supports the development of oral language skills by using a gradual release model, wherein students are given opportunities to talk with a partner about the text, read each other's writing, and discuss strategies for determining meaning of vocabulary words. Oral language development is embedded throughout with the use of sentence stems, sentence starters, and later, graphic organizers and anchor charts.

## **High-Frequency Words**

The collection of decodable books used in *Stepping Together* features a set of carefully sequenced high-frequency words and provides students with multiple opportunities to read and reread new sight words in context. Then, to support the acquisition of new words, the lessons include a phoneme-grapheme mapping routine. Once students are introduced to the new high-frequency word and map it, they have many opportunities to practice the new word in isolation and in the context of reading and writing. Using this multilayered approach ensures students will quickly develop a large bank of sight words.

The scope and sequence of the high-frequency words chosen for *Stepping Together* is informed by the Dolch word list. When possible, we have aligned sight words with the phonics focus, but we have prioritized introducing words most likely to show up in grade-level text. Students then build automaticity reading and writing those words in isolation and in context. Building a strong bank of sight words helps improve student confidence and efficacy when reading and writing.

## **Program Improvements**

At Pioneer Valley Books, we believe strongly in creating curricula that support teachers. Therefore, in response to this review, we have made several additions/improvements to our program for the State of Texas and its teachers.

- We have added an appendix to each grade-level teaching guide that provides an overview of how the ELPS align with all lesson components. Since the lesson components do not change across the program, this gives teachers a solid

understanding of how the ELPS are supported in each lesson. A breakdown of ELPS per lesson is included in Appendix A alongside the TEKS alignment.

- We have added lesson objectives to the beginning of each lesson. This ensures the lessons are comprehensive and provide support for unit internalization. Target skills covered include phonological/phonemic awareness, word study/phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, text features, and strategic processing.
- We have added material lists for teachers and students to each lesson card.
- We have added Letters for Caregivers for the beginning of the year and for each module.

Again, Pioneer Valley Books wishes to thank the Texas Education Agency and Safal Partners for including *Stepping Together* in their 2024 IMRA review. We believe in the strength of *Stepping Together*, not only to give students a strong background in foundational literacy skills, but to instill in them a lifelong love of books and reading.

If you would like to learn more about *Stepping Together*, please visit us at <https://pioneervalleybooks.com/pages/stepping-together>.