A Taste of the Standards for Fluency in Jewish Text & Practice

Excerpt from Tefillah Standards for Fluency

Compiled by Lisa Exler
**Portrait of Fluency**

**Snapshot**

An eighth grader who is fluent in Tefillah has an intimate relationship with the *siddur* which forms the basis of a rich spiritual life. Fluent in the words of the *tefillot* and familiar with the structure of the *siddur*, she can walk into a *minyan*, find her place and feel comfortable and confident in her ability to participate as a member of the kahal. With adequate preparation, she can lead weekday or Shabbat *tefillot*. She can translate most *tefillot*, knows the main themes of every *tefillah*, and can meaningfully connect the words she is reciting to her own life. She respects the fixed liturgy, understanding that it links her to the Jewish people across space and time, and she also strives for a *tefillah* practice that is intentional and expressive of her emotional life. As such, she uses the *siddur* and the experience of Tefillah to access and cultivate emotional dispositions such as awe, gratitude, yearning, and compassion. She understands Tefillah as a relationship between self, God, and community, and is committed to striving for growth in those relationships.

**Skills**

A fluent eighth grader can recite weekday and Shabbat *tefillot*, as well as Hallel and *berakhot*, accurately and fluently. Accurate reading includes the ability to read unseen passages of the *siddur*, while fluent reading includes the ability to read familiar texts with speed¹ (not because there is religious value to reading with speed but because speed indicates a level of comfort and familiarity with the prayers). Similarly, while fluency is not dependent on memorization, both memorization and the ability to complete phrases from the *siddur* are powerful indicators of a student’s fluency in Tefillah. A student fluent in Tefillah skills can participate in communal Tefillah by standing/sitting, bowing, and responding aloud when appropriate. With preparation, an eighth grader fluent in Tefillah can also lead weekday or Shabbat *tefillot* for the community.

**Content**

An eighth grader who is fluent in Tefillah comprehends the weekday and Shabbat *tefillot*. This includes knowing the structure of prayer services (Shacharit, Minchah, and Ma’ariv) as well as the internal structure of different parts of a service (Pesukei De-Zimra, Kri’at Shema, Amidah), which allows a student to locate *tefillot* in a *siddur*. Comprehension of *tefillot* also involves knowing the

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¹ Reading with speed implies a certain pace of words per minute. For example, a student reading the first paragraph of the Amidah fluently would read it in approximately 20 seconds. By eighth grade, students should be able to recite much of daily Tefillah at this pace.
meaning of individual tefillot. A fluent eighth grader can articulate the main theme of each tefillah and can independently translate all Birkot Ha-Shachar, Birkot Kri’at Shema, and the Amidah, consulting a dictionary for more poetic sections of the liturgy. Finally, an eighth grader who is fluent in Tefillah understands that the siddur is a text that evolved over time and is in dialogue with the Tanakh and with other rabbinic texts.

Dispositions
An eighth grader who is fluent in Tefillah brings a number of dispositions to his study and practice of Tefillah. She values Tefillah as an opportunity to connect with herself, God, and community, and to engage in a process of spiritual growth. As such, she has a rich and complex relationship to the words of the siddur, seeking to not only understand the literal meaning of the tefillot, but also to access their metaphorical, poetic, and literary meanings, and to connect these interpretations of tefillot to his lived experience and to his emotional life. She relates to Tefillah as more than an intellectual exercise, using the gestures, choreography, and music of Tefillah to deepen his experience. Patient and disciplined, she values the importance of a daily Tefillah practice (keva), and is meticulous about pronunciation and nusach. At the same time, she also exhibits a spirit of openness and creativity as she takes responsibility for increasing his kavannah, and making the experience of Tefillah meaningful for herself and for the others in his prayer community. She is self-aware, able to identify his feelings of awe, gratitude, yearning, and compassion, and reflect on the extent to which Tefillah is helping her to express those feelings. Finally, she understands Tefillah as an opportunity to explore his own theology, engaging in respectful expression of her questions and beliefs.
Fluency Benchmarks

These benchmarks are divided into three categories. Tefillah Performance refers to students’ technical ability to participate in actual prayer services, including reciting tefillot accurately and fluently, participating appropriately as a member of the kahal, and leading tefillot. Tefillah Learning refers to students’ knowledge about Tefillah, including the structure of the siddur and individual tefillot, the meaning of the tefillot, biblical sources of tefillot, rabbinic texts about Tefillah, and the historical development of the siddur. Tefillah Dispositions refers to attitudes towards Tefillah and the intersection of Tefillah and students’ personal and spiritual growth. The excerpt below shows fluency benchmarks for third through fifth grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Tefillah Performance Benchmarks</th>
<th>Tefillah Knowledge Benchmarks</th>
<th>Tefillah Dispositions Benchmarks</th>
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<tr>
<td>3–5</td>
<td>• Recite weekday Shacharit (from Yotzer Or through the Amidah as well as Birkot Ha-Shachar and selections of Pesukei De-Zimra) and Hallel accurately and fluently • Lead portions of a service</td>
<td>• Identify structural components of Shacharit, Minchah and Ma’ariv services • Navigate within siddur to find the following services: Weekday Shacharit, Minchah, Ma’ariv; Kabbalat Shabbat, Shabbat Shacharit, Shabbat Musaf; Hallel; Amidot for Yom Tov • Navigate within siddur to find the following tefillot in weekday and Shabbat/Yom Tov Shacharit (Birkot Ha-Shachar, Ashrei, Shema, Arnidah, Seder Hotza’at Ha-Torah) • Be aware of changes to the liturgy for special days (Hallel, Y’aaleh ve-Yavo, insertions for Aseret Yemei Teshuvah) • Employ a variety of strategies to translate tefillot • Express personal understandings of tefillot learned • Engage in respectful dialogue about Tefillah, including interpretations of tefillot, the experience of Tefillah and theology</td>
<td>• Demonstrate respect for Tefillah • Reflect on feelings about tefillot and the prayer experience • Employ strategies for increasing kavannah in Tefillah • Connect experiences of awe, gratitude, yearning and compassion to individual tefillot</td>
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Curriculum Considerations

The fluency standards above do not specify which tefillot to teach in which grades (with the exception of a few key tefillot such as Shema and the Amidah), nor do they suggest a methodology for teaching Tefillah. These decisions are best left to individual schools as schools differ in their pedagogical approaches and in the values and priorities which guide their curricula. However, because standards alone are difficult to implement, the curriculum map below offers a model of how a school could organize its Tefillah curriculum in order to ensure that students learn all of daily Shacharit by the conclusion of eighth grade, while also developing the dispositions necessary for a lifelong commitment to Tefillah and spiritual growth. The excerpt below shows a model of a fifth grade tefillah curriculum.

The model includes both lists of tefillot that are meant to be introduced and incorporated into daily Tefillah, as well as other topics for study and exploration. The “Tefillot” column includes a list of tefillot introduced each year. Combined with the tefillot from previous years, this constitutes the “matbe’a Tefillah” that is recited as part of daily Tefillah in that grade. The “Iyun Tefillah” column includes the learning and reflection about individual tefillot, Tefillah in general, and the Tefillah experience that should happen in each grade.

Sample Tefillah Curriculum Map

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Tefillot</th>
<th>Iyun Tefillah</th>
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| 5     | עבדו ומשה ובמי יאמרנו עבדו והמקום עבדו... | • Translation and main themes and key vocabulary of each tefillah that is recited as part of daily Tefillah  
• Study of keva and kavannah  
• Why do we daven?  
• What is my responsibility to the people I daven with?  
• What do I like about Tefillah? What is hard for me about Tefillah? How can I work on that?  
• What do I think about God?  
• What is amazing about our world?  
• What am I thankful for?  
• What do I want to ask for? |