



English language arts standards are too many, too confusing, and unlikely to really deliver the clear thinking and rigorous intellectual development that students need.

The problem with English language arts standards — and the simple, powerful solution

A close high school friend who went on to top corporate positions at Fortune 500 companies told me he had learned an indispensable lesson: Never distribute an important document before it's been vetted multiple times for clarity and concision. Why? Because a document that is the least bit ambiguous or confusing will result in fruitless, misdirected effort throughout the organization.

As he told me this, I thought of the various standards documents in education. Every informed educator now knows that our state standards were — and still are — too long and confusing. The average document contains as much as twice the amount of topics and skills that could realistically be taught in a nine-month school year (Marzano & Kendall 1998).

Then, there is the language of the standards themselves — the sloppy, imprecise prose in which they're so often written. I'm always amused that so many social studies or science concepts must be, in about equal parts, “described,” others “analyzed,” or “discussed.” It is perfectly plain that these verbs were assigned arbitrarily and that the language is a bluff; our tests never ask students to truly analyze or explain or discuss anything. They ask students to choose the correct answer on multiple-choice items.

The most troubling standards have to be those for English language arts. Current state ELA standards — still taught and tested by state assessments — require us to teach students to do things like “Segment spoken phonemes contained in one-syllable words from two to five phoneme sounds into individual phoneme sounds” or “Generate sounds from letters and letter patterns, including consonant blends and long- and short-vowel patterns (phonograms), to combine those sounds into recognizable words.”

Huh?

Just for fun, I occasionally ask audiences if they successfully taught their own children to read at home before they entered formal schooling. Almost all did. Then, I ask them if they used their state standards documents as a teaching aid. The typical response is laughter.

Common core standards

Now, we have the Common Core English Language Arts Standards. There is much to like here. I especially appreciate the ancillary documents, exemplar texts, and research, which call on students to closely read large amounts of increasingly complex texts and support their arguments and inferences with evidence from the texts.

That said, the explicit lists

of Common Core ELA standards in bulk are a problem. Though better, they embrace the unproven notion that literacy consists of mastering an exhaustive collection of separate, often specious, individually taught skills — about 70 to 100 distinctive standards per grade level. When will we learn that no one ever became literate by being taught how to do things like “identify the central idea” of a text. Or (compounding the idiocy) by being taught to “identify *two* central ideas” in the next grade level (both from the Common Core; my emphasis). The belief that literacy is acquired in this way encourages such tortured formulations — or worse. Consider these two standards, from the 8th-grade Common Core:

- Compare and contrast the structure of texts, and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style, and
- Analyze how the points of view of the characters and audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create effects like suspense or humor.

I don't know what these mean. Nor does Gerald Graff, the former president of the Modern Language Association. Nor do any of the ed-

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ucators we shared them with. But we are asking teachers to teach such nonsense (Schmoker & Graff, 2011).

We need to reexamine the notion that literacy consists of mastering long, often arcane lists of skills developed by presumed “experts.” This is, writes Daniel Willingham, the central problem with the Common Core. It continues to treat reading as “a skill” or a “series of strategies.” But reading “is not a ‘skill’ that can be taught directly.” Once students can decode, what they desperately need is far more time to actually read large amounts of fiction and nonfiction — mostly for argumentative and interpretive purposes. This unfailingly builds up their knowledge and vocabulary base and hence their ability to comprehend and thoughtfully engage with what they read. Our failure to understand this is no small matter. For Willingham, our overemphasis on discrete skills “may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in

the country” (2009, p. 1).

There is a better way. We see it at places like Tempe Prep, a middle and high school right in my neighborhood. Every day, *for two hours*, students learn English

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and social studies simply by closely reading and then discussing increasingly complex literary and historical texts. In their daily Socratic discussions, students advance and defend their arguments and interpretations in response to questions carefully prepared by teams of teachers. The last week of each month, students are taught

to write essays about one or more of the readings, based on a common writing rubric (about nine essays per year). That’s it. Teachers at such schools don’t consult, use, or even know where to find state or national standards for ELA. But that didn’t prevent Tempe Prep from becoming the first school in the state where 100% of students passed every portion of the state assessment (Schmoker, 2011).

Such schools conform closely to perhaps the best study ever done on what students need to be prepared for college. It found that — more than anything — students need to learn a coherent body of essential content in the subject areas. In addition, they must engage in abundant — *and explicitly defined amounts of* — reading, writing, and discussion appropriate to each discipline, including art and music. At every grade level, this reading, writing, and discussion should be built around the following simple standards:

- Making inferences/ drawing one’s own conclusions;
- Resolving conflicting ideas encountered in texts;
- Solving open-ended problems;
- Dismantling and supporting arguments with evidence (Conley, 2007).

If we embrace this approach from about 2nd grade and up, we won’t need to worry about performance on state assessments, the ACT, SAT, or whatever the Common Core assessment consortiums eventually concoct. We may, however, need to worry about where to put the unprecedented numbers of students who would flood our universities or pursue post-secondary studies — where they would flourish. **K**

References

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