

Review of Arizona's 2016 Draft English Language Arts Standards
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At the invitation of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, I have reviewed the final draft of the English language arts standards proposed by the Arizona Department of Education. The draft is a response to Governor Ducey's call to review and revise the state's current English Language Arts standards, adopted in 2010.

I commend the department for efforts to ensure that the new English language arts standards do not define how teachers should teach or dictate curriculum. I also commend the department for its intention to offer a "content-rich" curriculum in contrast to whatever was in its 2010 standards. But it seems that the ELA review committee members it selected found it difficult to ignore the 2010 standards they have been using for five years. Despite intentions to eliminate pedagogical commands, the draft contains pedagogical or curriculum commands in every strand, as well as missing standards. These dictates and omissions need to be addressed as soon as possible, especially in the Vocabulary strand (my particular area of expertise).

1. Vocabulary Sub-Strand:

At every grade level, students are advised to draw from certain strategies to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. The first strategy always recommended is to "use context clues." Not only should this pedagogical strategy be stricken from this document, it should not be taught in education methods courses. There is NO body of research to support it, and it doesn't make sense. Nor did the National Reading Panel's 2000 report recommend this strategy. In authentic writing, one usually does not find "clues" to the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Strong reading, writing, and speaking vocabularies are developed in other ways.

As for omissions, I am surprised to see no specific dictionary skills expected of elementary students. In pre-Common Core Massachusetts standards, dictionary skills were to be taught in all elementary grades and were assessed on state tests for many years. Standards for dictionary skills should be added.

2. Writing Strand:

In grades K to 5, teachers are to have students write opinion pieces. This curriculum mandate should be removed in all these grades. Opinion pieces are bad practice for young students and are not the source of persuasive writing or academic argument in higher grades. Experience-based and imaginative compositions, as well as informational writing, are all that is needed in K-6 to develop skill with paragraphing, topic sentences, sentence structure, and writing conventions. If persuasive writing is to be developed in elementary writing curricula, its two major rhetorical features (purpose and audience) should be the focus of the writing assignments.

3. Speaking and Listening Strand.

Few speaking standards can be found in this strand. Standards eliciting talk were chiefly for discussion purposes. I strongly recommend inserting standards on the development of children's speaking skills. For example, in grade 1, one could expect all students to explain orally personal interests, tell stories, or recite poems, speaking clearly with adequate volume and keeping eye contact with the audience. By grade 12, all students should be able to critique a formal speech given by a member of the local community at a public meeting, using a professional scoring guide (e.g., a guide for Toastmasters International contests). The Speech Communication Association had a useful set of standards for K-12. There are others also worth looking at.

4. Reading Strand

Here is where the expertise of the ELA Workgroups wasn't sufficiently tapped. Arizona's reading or English teachers need more useful standards in at least three ways.

- a. **Clues in the standards to reading difficulty level.** The draft standards do not provide any clues about the level of reading difficulty desired—at any grade. The suggestion that teachers use “qualitative and quantitative measures appropriate to the grade” are of little use. How would new teachers, especially, know what is appropriate to a grade? Most teachers don't have time to apply quantitative measures to every text they want to consider. Nor will a coherent curriculum result from the use of such measures.

I recommend that the Superintendent of Public Instruction require, for every reading standard, three different sample titles, each with author and date of publication given, one of which should be above grade level, a second on grade level, and a third below grade level, so that teachers see a range of possibilities and expectations from grade to grade. These sample titles should be accompanied by a clear warning to test developers and teachers that none of these titles are to be used for test items. Three such examples for each reading standard would also mean that a one-size-for-all curriculum could not be dictated by professional development providers or department of education staff. Teachers should be able to choose whatever reading levels and types of selections make sense for their students, drawing on the range of possibilities suggested for a grade.

- b. **Clues in the standards to the state and country students live in.** Most parents and others probably want students, when they become of age, to be willing to pay taxes to their local, state, and national communities, serve on juries, and vote in local, state, and national elections. ELA standards should help students in Arizona's public schools to identify themselves as Arizona citizens and inform Arizona teachers who don't know what recognized writers were born in or wrote about Arizona (e.g., Zane Grey) or what political leaders (e.g., Barry Goldwater), military heroes (e.g., Ira Hayes), or other Arizonans were recognized for their achievements. In providing at least three examples of what students could read about Arizona or recognized Arizonans, the standards would prevent efforts by the federal government or others to dictate the same curriculum for all students.

At least two reading standards should be added at all grade levels: one to the literature standards, the other to the “informational” standards.

For the Literature standards, add: “students read several literary texts written by recognized authors who were born in or wrote about Arizona (e.g., Zane Grey and two others).”

For the Informational standards, add: “students read several informational texts about recognized and accomplished individuals (artists, scientists, military leaders, or politicians) who were born in or lived in Arizona and about important events or physical phenomena in Arizona's history or geography (e.g., Ira Hayes, Barry Goldwater, others).”

- c. **Clearly written standards.** There must be many high school English teachers in Arizona who were not on the review committee but who write better English prose than

one finds in the many Common Core standards that were simply copied by the review committee for this draft. The reason so many were copied word for word from the 2010 standards, one suspects, was that their meaning wasn't clear enough for paraphrasing, and committee members may have decided to leave their interpretation to a test developer. For example, the two standards below are copied word for word from the 2010 standards, contain too many parts, and are poorly written:

“9-10.RI.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.”

“9-10.RI.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.”

Recommendations: I strongly recommend that Superintendent Douglas and Governor Ducey invite a group of editors of Arizona newspapers and/or other media publications to revise and rewrite draft ELA standards that do not meet their own standards for clear and well-written English prose. At the same time, they should be encouraged to make the content-poor secondary standards content-rich, either by adding examples of titles to clarify the level of academic demand or by indicating the seminal political documents English teachers should teach in Arizona's public schools, for their literary and cultural significance (e.g., the *Declaration of Independence*, *Gettysburg Address*, *Preamble to the Constitution*). They were removed from the 2010 standards the workgroup copied. For unclear reasons, it seems to have thought that Arizona's students should not have a common understanding of their own civic culture.

If it is not possible to find a group of Arizona newspaper editors to rewrite the poorly written English language arts standards, then I suggest that Superintendent Douglas and Governor Ducey re-adopt all the 2003 Arizona literature standards in place of those in this draft document. Overall, they were quite good. For example, in grade 11, students are to read “works of American literature that reflect our major literary periods and traditions.” As the Thomas B. Fordham reviewer noted in a 2010 review comparing state standards with Common Core's: “Arizona treats literary and non-literary texts distinctly and thoroughly and in more detail than the Common Core.”