

## Kansas Additions to Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (ELA)

The *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History-Social Studies and Science* are a next generation of K-12 standards designed to help promote college and career readiness. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) should be applauded for this public draft of their important work.

However, as is stated in the current draft of the standards, “by focusing on required achievements, the *Standards* leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (p. 2). With this in mind, Kansas educators feel it is important that the *Standards* not only address the results of students learning but also address the means and processes that will help students and their teachers to achieve these results.

As Kansas develops accompanying support documents and resources for educators and adds our “15%” to the Common Core Standards, we feel it is crucial that we address the following twelve elements. Each of these elements is also detailed in the *Rationale* section below. To the Common Core Standards for English language arts (ELA), we would incorporate the following ideas:

- ELA learning occurs in an *integrated fashion*, not as discrete skills taught in isolation;
- ELA learning is a *social, collaborative, and community effort*;
- Addressing the needs of *all learners* including *general education, gifted, English language learners and students with disabilities*;
- Enrichment of the *five essential components of reading* (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), not only at the elementary level but all grade levels;
- Creating a *strategic and coherent focus on adolescent literacy across all content areas* and shared literacy responsibility for all Kansas educators.
- Specifically address both *the reading and writing of technical texts* as preparation for 21<sup>st</sup> Century career opportunities;
- Explicitly address *skills in media literacy and the viewing and creating of multi-modal products*;
- Include a stronger emphasis on *writing craft and the expression of self and creativity*, rather than just focusing on content and mechanical correctness;
- Strengthen *active and critical listening and public speaking and presenting*;
- Encourage *meta-cognition and student ownership of assessment and progress monitoring*;

- Amend the illustrative lists of text to embody more *engaging literature* and *cultural sensitivity*; and
- Encourage *on-going professional development and learning for Kansas educators*.

### **Rationale**

We believe in a commonly held approach to English language arts (ELA) instruction that is *collaborative, constructive, inferential, process-based, and inclusive of multiple multi-modal texts*. Any standards for ELA—and the language that articulates those standards and the various documents that support those standards—are most helpful when they reflect what educators broadly understand, practice, and value in their work. Language that is extractive, too literal, and product-based is all too likely to promote polarization within the profession and rekindle past paradigm wars, such as *phonics versus whole language* and *grammar study versus process writing*. Throughout Kansas’s additions to the Common Core Standards in ELA we seek to embody a broader perspective of the discipline which would make these standards more accessible to all educators and help to avoid such discord and misinterpretation.

Reading, writing, discussion, and language skills are neither taught nor learned in isolation, but instead are taught and learned simultaneously in an **interrelated fashion**. In short, the whole of English language arts is greater than the sum of its parts. A type of synergy is created when the connections among these strands are acknowledged and realized; this document should encourage educators to embrace this reality. Additionally, scaffolding is necessary so students have a firm foundation; it is one of the necessary building blocks to achieve the rigor and high level of competence required for 21st century career and college requirements. And, often times, the specific scaffolding necessary to provide that firm foundation requires that students reach across the various stands. For example: strong writing can be spurred by reading model texts, analyzing text structure can be facilitated by writing content following a specific structure, discussion (talk) can strengthen the comprehension of text and the clear articulation and support of ideas in writing, etc.

Likewise, ELA learning is a **social, collaborative, and community effort** in that readers and writers increase their skill development and mastery of concepts by sharing and actively discussing with peers and adults. Discussion (talk) is a necessary component of ELA instruction and an essential key to reading and writing skill improvement; the social aspect of ELA learning in a classroom, in a community, and in a global society must be evident in these standards and throughout our instruction.

**Addressing the needs of all learners, including general education, gifted, English language learners, and students with disabilities** needs to remain a central focus of education in Kansas. Our state already has a number of initiatives in place and the *Standards* can be integrated into and strengthen these programs. Kansas Multi-Tiered System of Supports is a coherent continuum of evidence based, system- practices to support a rapid response to

academic and behavioral needs, with frequent data-based monitoring for instructional decision-making to empower each Kansas student to achieve high standards. Kansas Reading First provides teachers with research-based instructional techniques and academic achievement monitoring tools in the five core areas of reading identified by the National Reading Panel.

Along these same lines, and essential to the teaching of ELA is helping students “learn to read” and “read to learn.” Although, traditionally, “learning to read” has been the focus of grades K-3 and “reading to learn” has been the focus of grades 4-12, we recognize the need and the benefits of applying both of these ideas in all grades K-12. To accomplish this, we will enrich **the five essential components of reading** (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) at all grade levels and create **a strategic and coherent focus on adolescent literacy across all content areas**. This work will include, but not be limited to, the following ideas: *reading for a variety of purposes*—whether for comprehension of technical information, reading for analysis of technique, reading for pleasure; *activating prior knowledge and experience as a pre-reading strategy*; *asking questions and using meta-cognition to monitor understanding*; and *reading engagement and enjoyment*. These elements are in accordance with guidance from the United States Department of Education and the Center on Instruction’s *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*, which encourage the following five recommendations:

1. Provide explicit instruction and supportive practice in the use of effective comprehension strategies throughout the school day;
2. Increase the amount and quality of open, sustained discussion of reading content;
3. Set and maintain high standards for text, conversation, questions, and vocabulary;
4. Increase students’ motivation and engagement with reading; and
5. Teach essential content knowledge so that all students master critical concepts. (Torgesen, 2007).

These elements are also aligned with those expressed in *Principled Practice for Adolescent Literacy: A Framework for Instruction and Policy* (2006):

- engage with print and non-print texts for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts;
- generate and express rich understandings of ideas and concepts;
- demonstrate enthusiasm for reading and learning;
- assess their own literacy and learning competencies and direct their future growth;
- connect reading with their life and their learning inside and outside of school; and
- develop critical perspectives toward what they read, view, and hear.

One particular area where we feel the standards need additional strengthening is in the area of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and career preparation. One method for strengthening this element in the common core is by **including the reading and writing of technical texts**, both of which are very real and necessary skills for the 21st century learner. Likewise, we are also concerned by **the draft’s silence on student skills in viewing and creating multi-modal products and media literacy**. These two areas are essential components of workplace literacy and life in our contemporary world and global society. By ignoring these concepts and skills, these standards

run the risk of alienating the importance of the real-world relevance and experience our students need to gain to help them engage with our curricula and prepare for successful lives and careers beyond school.

Additionally, more attention needs to be paid in the *Standards* to **the demands of writing process instruction and elements of writing craft**. Currently, the standards for writing and language development focus almost entirely on content and mechanical correctness; topics such as word choice, tone, style, sentence fluency, and the manipulation of these elements for effect are given little—if any—attention. Educators and students alike will need more explicit guidance and direction in creating effective writing instruction that goes beyond the mere *assignment* of students to write. Regurgitation of content is not enough; students need explicit instruction in writing craft and need to be spurred to write creatively to develop imaginative thinking.

Likewise, two other important elements we would like to see strengthened are **active and critical listening and public speaking and presenting**. Although present in the *Standards*, we believe that encouraging and providing additional supports for these speaking and listening skills will strengthen student learning and better prepare students for lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As technology continues to become ubiquitous in our society, it is essential that our students learn to incorporate these skills into our contemporary world.

Because literacy skills are essential to learning, we feel strongly that the *Standards* need to be strengthened with regard to **meta-cognition**. Helping students to understand and apply what they know about their own reading, writing, research, discussion, and language processes helps them to improve their future achievement and instill a desire for life-long learning. Additionally, because these literacy skills are process-based and not just product-based, understanding one's own reading process or writing process will also help to strengthen skills in each of these areas. We believe achieving this success will be far easier if we encourage students to be more involved and to take more **ownership of assessment and progress monitoring**. Active involvement in charting progress and celebrating academic success will not only reinforce the learning of students but will support and encourage the meta-cognitive skills needed to become effective life-long learners.

We feel strongly that some of the suggested readings—although they certainly can be labeled “classic”—are unrealistic, non-engaging, and disrespectful to the diverse students in today's classrooms. As a whole, this list does not represent cultural diversity. To represent our students and their lives with more equity, and to provide more guidance and benefit to teachers, **this list needs to embody engaging literature sensitive to issues of race, class, culture, religion, and gender**. Their omission will only repeat past sins in further marginalizing various groups and the merit of these works. Although the study of texts certainly seeks to broaden the perspectives and vicarious experiences of readers, all students also deserve the opportunity to encounter works that reflect their own sense of self-identity.

Finally, encouraging **on-going professional development and learning for educators** is essential to meet the opportunities provided by the *Standards*. Knowing these standards will continue to change and improve over time, it will become increasingly important that classroom

teachers are offered the instructional knowledge, resources, and support to facilitate the growth and improvement of their instructional practice. Specific attention will need to focus on promising practices addressing individual standards, information about assessment with multiple measures, including performance, formative, and interim elements, and rubrics that guide instruction.

### References

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