

# CCSS-ELA

## Suggestions and Cautions for Implementing the Reading Standards

Sheila W. Valencia ■ Karen K. Wixson

The majority of states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (CCSS-ELA), and assessments aligned with the Standards are scheduled to come online in 2014–2015. It is no surprise, then, that classroom teachers and school district personnel are focusing enormous attention on understanding the Standards and learning how to teach to them. Like other prior initiatives to improve educational outcomes by implementing new standards and assessments, this effort will succeed in improving students' reading only if we understand the thinking that underlies the Standards, keep that thinking front and center, and attend to the full array of contextual factors that influence student achievement (e.g., poverty, language, community, school leadership) (Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin, 2011; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011; Valencia & Wixson, 2000).

Too often, attention is diverted from the important overarching goals to the smallest, most specific elements of the Standards that look very much like traditional reading skills and strategies (Valencia & Wixson, 2001). Together with the pressure of high-stakes assessment that often accompanies standards-based reform, this focus on the details, without consideration of the big ideas, often results in misguided instruction and the ultimate failure of reading standards to produce better learning and teaching. Our purpose here is to help consumers of the Standards avoid these missteps by offering some suggestions and cautions we believe will support effective implementation of the CCSS-ELA.

### Understanding the Vision

#### Suggestions

We recommend that everyone (teachers, administrators, parents, assessment directors, etc.) begin their

work with the CCSS-ELA by reading and discussing the introduction to the document on pages 3–8 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Here, the intent of the CCSS-ELA is explained, and a portrait of students who meet the Standards is described

Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. (p. 3)

For most of us, the goals and vision for the Standards will ring authentic, rigorous, and worthy of instruction.

We suggest that decisions related to curriculum and instruction intended to help students achieve the Standards must always be done in the context of the CCSS-ELA vision. The importance of staying focused on this vision becomes even more apparent when we consider the specific Grade-Level Standards in the next section.

#### Cautions

The introduction to the CCSS-ELA makes clear several other points that we believe are important for teachers and administrators to understand:

---

**Sheila W. Valencia** is professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Washington, Seattle, USA; e-mail [valencia@uw.edu](mailto:valencia@uw.edu).

The department editor welcomes reader comments. **Karen K. Wixson** is dean and professor of education at University of North Carolina Greensboro, USA; e-mail [kwixson@uncg.edu](mailto:kwixson@uncg.edu).

---

*“For most of us, the goals and vision for the Standards will ring authentic, rigorous, and worthy of instruction.”*

- (a) The Standards are a vision; they do not prescribe exactly what should be taught and they “do not describe all that can or should be taught” (p.3).
- (b) The Standards do not require nor do they endorse particular instructional strategies, programs, interventions, or assessments. Good teachers can teach these Standards using a variety of approaches and a variety of materials. “Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (p. 4).

We emphasize these cautions because educators are being inundated with new curriculum materials and new “mandates” aimed at the Standards. Although new materials and professional development opportunities may provide useful supports for teaching to the Standards, no single approach is called for, nor has any research yet been conducted on effective strategies for helping all students achieve these Standards. As always, teachers with deep knowledge of their subject matter and of their students are the key to improved student learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

### **Understanding the Anchor and Grade-Level Standards Suggestions**

The CCSS-ELA document is organized into three sections: K–5 and two content-specific sections for grades 6–12, one for ELA and the other for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Within each section there are 10 College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards, also known as Anchor Standards for Reading; 9 of these Standards address comprehension, and Anchor Standard 10 addresses text complexity. These 10 Anchor (or CCR) Standards are identical across all grades and content areas (literature, informational, and history/social studies, science, and technical subjects). For each Anchor Standard, there are Grade-Level Standards for every grade, K–8, and for grades 9–10 and 11–12. In addition to these comprehension-oriented Reading Anchor Standards, the K–5 section includes specific Grade-Level Standards for Foundational Skills: Print Concepts (K–1); Phonological Awareness (K–1), Phonics, and Word Recognition (K–5); and Fluency (K–5) (p. 15–17).

We recommend using the Anchor Standards for Reading to guide instruction, paying particular attention to the three categories of comprehension under which the Anchor Standards are organized: Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (p. 10). As with the introduction and vision of the

Standards, these broad areas help us interpret and fully understand the intent of each Anchor Standard. For example:

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Anchor Standard 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

By thinking about this Anchor Standard in terms of “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,” we are more likely to teach students to think about the big ideas in texts and to use evidence to support their thinking than to simply ask them to list isolated warrants, evidence, claims, causes, and so forth.

### **Cautions**

Although each of the Anchor Standards is further defined by grade level, we caution educators to bring a generous interpretation and implementation to the Grade-Level Standards—not to follow them too literally. We base this recommendation on two observations. First, the Grade-Level Standards were established by a consensus process during which reading experts tried to differentiate expectations across the grade levels. However, a panel of reading experts concluded that our field does not yet have a research base to support these grade-level distinctions and,

*“The Standards...’do not describe all that can or should be taught’ (p. 3).”*

in several cases, higher Grade-Level Standards do not clearly build on prior grade levels or reflect increasing sophistication (Wixson, Valencia, Murphy, & Phillips, 2013). For example:

Anchor Standard 1—Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Grade 3—Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

Grade 4—Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

Grade 5—Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

Second, this same panel noted some inconsistencies in specificity and complexity across the grades. Sometimes the Grade-Level Standards include so much specificity that it is difficult to identify alignment with a single Anchor Standard. For example, Reading Anchor Standard 3 focuses on identifying and describing characters, settings, and major events in stories at kindergarten and grades 1, 4, and 5; however, the Standards for grades 2 and 3 focus only on characters. Similarly, Reading Anchor Standard 4 identifies a particular genre or specific types of texts only at specific grades:

Anchor Standard 4 (grade 4)—Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g., Hercules).

*“Grade-Level Standards are best thought of as examples of the Anchor Standards rather than definitive, specific Grade-Level Standards.”*

These examples suggest that the Grade-Level Standards are best thought of as examples of the Anchor Standards rather than definitive, specific Grade-Level Standards. Our recommendation, therefore, is to begin with the Reading Anchor Standards 1–9 and the category under which each is listed (e.g., Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure). Then read the Grade-Level Standards for that Anchor Standard across a range of three to four grade levels to get a sense of the expectations that might be appropriate for your students. Then, go back to the Anchor Standard to plan instruction.

### **Suggestions**

An exception to our suggestion about attending to the Anchor and Grade-Level Standards pertains to the Standards for Foundational Skills. Here we suggest close attention to the grade-level skills under the headings of Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, Phonics and Word Recognition, and Fluency. The developmental research base for these foundational skills is well established, and the Grade-Level Standards for these Foundational Skills are helpful in determining a general scope and sequence for instruction. The CCSS-ELA Appendix A (pp. 17–22) also includes helpful information for teachers in the area of Phonics and Word Recognition.

### **Cautions**

One caution regarding foundational skills is drawn directly from the Standards document itself (p. 15), which

reminds us that foundational skills “are not an end in and of themselves”; rather, they are a necessary and important component of an effective reading program designed to develop students who read with deep understanding across a variety of texts. Furthermore, the document cautions that instruction in foundational skills must be differentiated to meet the needs of each student. Finally, we would add that teaching foundational skills should always include having children read continuous text and engage in writing activities; children need to experience reading and application of foundational skills in meaningful contexts (Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, 1998; Lipson & Wixson, 2013).

## **Understanding Implications for Instruction**

### **Suggestions**

The developers of the Standards and the two consortia designing state assessments to measure achievement of the Standards use the terms *complexity*, *evidence*, and *knowledge* to describe the key shifts in curriculum and instruction implied by the CCSS-ELA. *Complexity* is defined as regular practice with complex text and its academic language. *Evidence* consists of reading and writing grounded in information from literary and informational text, and *knowledge* refers to building knowledge through engagement with content rich text. These shifts require curriculum and instruction focused on texts

worth reading, tasks worth engaging in, and integrated teaching and learning. Integrated teaching and learning includes integration across the areas of the language arts (reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language), integration of Grade-Level Standards within and across the areas of the language arts, and integration of ELA with subject matter content.

Integration across the language arts is evident in both the Standards and the prototypes for assessment tasks provided by the assessment consortia. For example, the set of Reading Anchor Standards listed under “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas” is directly related to the set of Writing Anchor Standards listed under “Research to Build and Present Knowledge.” The integration of reading and writing is also prominent in the sample performance tasks released by the two assessment consortia, which require students to “write to sources.”

The Reading Standards emphasize teaching students to read closely and to synthesize information and ideas within and across texts. Students need to be taught how to “think with text” by asking and answering questions such as, How did you (or I) figure that out? What does the author mean by...? Can more than one conclusion be drawn? They also need to be taught how to use evidence from text to support their claims and how to use the knowledge they are acquiring through reading for a range of purposes and tasks.

*“Students need to be taught how to ‘think with text.’”*

*“The Standards will not be achieved simply by asking students to engage in more challenging tasks with more challenging texts.”*

We also suggest that teachers provide students with opportunities to transfer the knowledge and skills they have acquired to situations requiring independent reading of new texts. Specifically, teachers need to set up “cold” reads and transfer situations to evaluate students’ ability to apply what they have been taught.

Teaching students how to “think with text” applies both to reading within an ELA curriculum and reading across the curriculum. It also requires teachers to evaluate students’ familiarity with text structures and content and to provide instruction as needed. Finally, none of these goals are likely to be achieved without attention to motivational and strategic aspects of reading instruction.

### **Cautions**

Based on our suggestions, it should be no surprise that we offer cautions about creating a standards or objective-based curriculum focused on individual Grade-Level Standards. We believe this approach misses the forest for the trees. If a skill-based curriculum is already in place, we recommend a whole-part-whole approach. That is, begin with a holistic reading task, step out of the task to focus on a particular skill, then return to the original reading task to apply the skill in context.

We also caution against either complete elimination of prereading instruction or providing so much prereading information that students

are simply filling in the blanks. Done well, prereading instruction promotes the knowledge and skills needed to successfully comprehend specific texts as well as other texts on similar topics or with similar characteristics.

In sum, the Standards will not be achieved simply by asking students to engage in more challenging tasks with more challenging texts. Rather, the success of the Standards depends on educators’ ability to understand and implement the core vision and intent of the Standards, and their ability to carefully craft instruction to meet the needs of their students.

### **REFERENCES**

- Coburn, C.E., Pearson, P.D., & Woulfin, S. (2011). Reading policy in the era of accountability. In M. Kamil, P.D. Pearson, E.B. Moje, & P.P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. IV, pp. 561–593). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. (1998). C.E. Snow, M.S. Burns, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipson, M.Y., & Wixson, K.K. (2013). *Assessment of reading and writing difficulties* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common core standards for English language arts and history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- Taylor, B.M., Raphael, T.E., & Au, K.H. (2011). Reading and school reform. In M. Kamil, P.D. Pearson, E.B. Moje, & P.P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. IV, pp. 594–628). New York, NY: Routledge.

---

CCSS-ELA: SUGGESTIONS AND CAUTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE READING STANDARDS

---

Valencia, S.W., & Wixson, K.K. (2000). Policy-oriented research on literacy standards and assessment. In M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3, pp. 909–935). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Valencia, S.W., & Wixson, K.K. (2001). *Inside English/Language Arts standards: What's*

*in a grade?* *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(2), 202–211.

Wixson, K.K., Valencia, S.W., Murphy, S., & Phillips, G.W. (2013). Study of NAEP reading and writing frameworks and assessments in relation to the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts. In F. Stancavage, G.W.

Bohrnstedt, S. Rosenberg, & T. Zhang (Eds.), *Examining the content and context of the Common Core State Standards: A first look at implications for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. A publication of the NAEP Validity Studies Panel*. San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research.