

Review of Oklahoma’s Academic Standards for the English Language Arts
Sandra Stotsky
March 9, 2016

In the introduction to its 2010 evaluation of state standards, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute commented as follows:

As we’ve argued for a dozen-plus years now, standards are the foundation upon which almost everything else rests—or should rest. They should guide state assessments and accountability systems; inform teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development; and give shape to curricula, textbooks, software programs, and more. Choose your metaphor: Standards are targets, or blueprints, or roadmaps. They set the destination: what we want our students to know and be able to do by the end of their K-12 experience, and the benchmarks they should reach along the way. If the standards are vague, watered-down, or misguided, they can point our schools down perilous paths. **If there are no standards worth following, there is no education destination worth reaching.**

In this review of revised English Language Arts standards proposed by the Oklahoma State Department of Education in 2016 for approval by the Oklahoma State Legislature, I will show why these standards cannot lead to strong academic outcomes for the state’s K-12 students, no matter what other educational goals Oklahoma is seeking. They are not worth following.

It is clear that the revision committee spent a great deal of time on the standards in the eight strands it chose as the framework for this document. These strands are: Standard 1: Speaking and Listening; Standard 2: Reading Foundations with Reading and Writing Process; Standard 3: Critical Reading and Writing; Standard 4: Vocabulary; Standard 5: Language; Standard 6: Research; Standard 7: Multimodal Literacies; and Standard 8: Independent Reading and Writing. Several strands reflect the work of experienced teachers (e.g., Reading Foundations and Language).

While there are some aspects of the standards framework that are useful it is important to note that the kind of strands that serve to help teachers to shape a coherent and rigorous curriculum through the grades are not there (e.g., strands for the major genres of Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, Drama, and Traditional Literature). Strands for these major genres typically contain progressions of content-rich standards through the grades that enable teachers to construct coherent classroom curricula—a reading/literature curriculum with literary and non-literary texts sequenced in ways that result in cumulative learning. Sometimes these sequences appear in other strands in other documents, but the default strands in the proposed standards that could contain these progressions of content-rich standards do not have the content necessary for developing the knowledge base for critical reading, thinking, and writing (e.g., Vocabulary, Critical Reading and Writing, and Multimodal Literacies). These three strands in particular turn out to be empty place-holders, as I will show. I organize my comments around seven questions, using examples from these proposed strands.

1. Do the proposed ELA standards enable teachers to construct a coherent and academically strong reading and writing curriculum in K-12?

There are few progressions (grade by grade development) that would help teachers to construct sound and rigorous reading curricula. For example, in strand 3—on critical reading and writing, we find in grade 5: **5.3.R.7** Students will compare and contrast texts and ideas within and between texts. In grade 6, **6.3.R.7** Students will analyze texts and ideas within and between texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. In grade 7, **7.3.R.7** Students will make connections (e.g., *thematic links*) between

and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. In grade 8, **8.3.R.7** Students will make connections (*e.g., thematic links, literary analysis*) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. In grade 9, **9.3.R.7** Students will make connections (*e.g., thematic links, literary analysis*) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. In grade 10, **10.3.R.7** Students will make connections (*e.g., thematic links, literary analysis*) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. In grade 11, **11.3.R.7** Students will make connections (*e.g., thematic links, literary analysis, authors' style*) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. And in grade 12, **12.3.R.7** Students will make connections (*e.g., thematic links, literary analysis, authors' style*) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences.

As illustrated, from grade 5 to grade 12, this major “standard” has not basically changed and there is nothing to suggest an increasing level of reading difficulty or intellectual challenge through the grades, or what kinds of texts and genres (not specific texts) might be in a reading curriculum. Although the strand purportedly develops “critical reading and writing,” students could in theory read different versions of “The Three Little Pigs” and other folk tales for 8 grades to satisfy this “standard.” (This skill/standard can be found, in almost the same words, in Common Core.)

2. Do the proposed ELA standards enable Oklahoma parents to understand what is expected of their children at each grade level?

Progressions of proposed standards in the Vocabulary strand leave both parents and teachers in the dark. For example, in grade 5, we find “**5.4.R.3** Students will use context clues to determine or clarify the meaning of words or distinguish among multiple-meaning words.” In grades 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, we find the exact same standard, without one example of possible words students might encounter in their reading in any subject at their grade-level. Not only does this Common Core-based standard provide no insight to parents or guidance to teachers on the nature of vocabulary growth through eight grades of schooling, it also gives teachers completely wrong pedagogical advice. In authentic, well-written reading materials, one typically cannot use context to determine meanings of unknown words. Moreover, there is no research evidence to support this notion, which has run rampant through most of our teacher training programs despite the lack of research evidence. As important as it is to develop students’ vocabulary, this strand is the weakest strand in the entire document, and most of it is pedagogically wrong.

3. Do the proposed ELA standards enable teachers to prepare students for authentic freshman work at a post-secondary institution in Oklahoma without the need for remedial coursework?

It is unlikely that Oklahoma teachers will be able to make their students more ready for authentic college freshman coursework using the proposed “Academic Standards” than they now do. Addressing these proposed standards, they may even decelerate their students’ growth as readers (unintentionally). The following proposed standard, basically unchanged through the grades, is a form of gibberish frequently found in Common Core as well as in the Oklahoma “Academic” Standards for ELA. One finds this proposed “standard” verbatim in seven grades beginning in grade 6: “**6.7.R.2** Students will analyze the impact of selected media and formats on meaning.” It is in a strand called “Multimodal Literacies”—another example of gibberish. What does the strand title or the “standard” itself mean? Where does this jargon come from? Although the Oklahoma Department of Education promises to provide support materials for teachers, one may wonder how useful these materials can be. It is doubtful that the state’s students will be capable of responsible citizenship, never mind non-remedial coursework in college, based on standards with little or no meaning.

4. Are the proposed ELA standards teachable and testable? A testing company can use whatever reading passages it chooses to use and claim to address these proposed standards. Who could argue with the testing company? There is little in most standards in most strands to guide test developers or classroom teachers.

5. *Can the proposed ELA standards be useful in training prospective and practicing elementary, middle, high school teachers?* There is not enough substance in most of them to guide teacher preparation or ensure sound professional development.

6. *Do the proposed standards require students to become familiar with significant texts, people, movements, and events in Oklahoma's political, intellectual, and literary history?*

The proposed standards are purported to be written by Oklahomans for Oklahomans. Yet, one looks in vain for standards that expect future taxpayers in Oklahoma to become familiar with some of the significant texts, people, movements, or events in the state's political, literary, and intellectual history (e.g., Will Rogers, Speaker Carl Albert, Colonel Tom Stafford, General Tommy Franks, composer and poet Jimmy Webb, literary contributions of the state's Native Americans, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Chisholm Trail, the first railroads across Oklahoma, the Trail of Tears). Their heritage as Oklahomans is nowhere addressed in these standards. No set of ELA standards can mandate specific texts unless a state legislature requires them, but general standards like those below will provide some of the essential content of the English language arts and reading curriculum that is now missing:

1. In grades 9-12, at each grade level, students are to read literary texts by recognized authors who were born in or wrote about Oklahoma.
2. In grades 9-12, at each grade level, students are to read biographies or autobiographies of recognized political, social, and intellectual leaders in Oklahoma's history, before and after statehood.
3. In grades 9-12, at each grade level, students are to read recognized historical nonfiction about significant events and movements in Oklahoma's history.

These are the kind of standards that should be added to a document for Oklahoman students. In all cases, teachers would construct their own classroom reading curriculum according to policies established by their local board of education.

7. *Do the proposed standards require students to become familiar with this country's intellectual history and seminal political documents?*

Nowhere does one find the only clear content that was in Common Core's High School ELA Standards. Its standards required study of this country's founding and seminal documents. They should be spelled out in this document, and, with the state legislature's approval, required as interdisciplinary readings: Preamble to the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Federalist Papers #10 and #52, Mayflower Compact, the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, Gettysburg Address, Washington's Farewell Address, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

A standard can also require study of Bible stories as literature (King James Version), as it is a well-known fact that the two most significant influences on the English language in the past 500 years have been Shakespeare and the KJV. Judges have ruled on the matter in court cases: there is no legal prohibition against the study of the Bible as literature.

Concluding Remarks

It is not clear to me why there is no literary or non-literary content in the proposed reading and literature strands and standards. This situation presents a double-edged sword. The absence of an Oklahoma touch to these standards makes it easier for the state to use off-the-shelf reading tests that can be given to more than one state. And an off-the-shelf test may be much cheaper than a test tailored to one particular state. But off-the-shelf tests clearly fail with respect to equity. Different communities can approve very different kind of reading/literature curricula, allowing some students to be challenged in ways others aren't (and to be better prepared for post-secondary education) and allowing those students to learn or learn about what many others are

not learning or learning about, making a mockery of the idea of a common core. Off-the-shelf tests with no state-specific content also fail to pass on to the next generation of students an understanding of their own cultural legacy and the basic knowledge they need for citizenship in Oklahoma and this country. That should be worth paying for. Our students will not simply be citizens of the world, or global citizens in a “global economy.” We want them to support their own local and state institutions—to undertake the ennobling activities we call self-government with pride and with understanding of those who participate with them in these activities.

All students should have the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills to the maximum. But critical thinking cannot be developed in an intellectual vacuum. These proposed standards fail on the most important issue of all. Some significant content has to be taught to them if they are to see themselves and those they know sharing a state and a country together. Common Core’s ELA standards were not quite as empty as these proposed standards are. This document is completely empty. An empty document does not develop young minds, or help teachers to develop a sound and rigorous curriculum.