

To: Commissioner Yecke and Members of the K-12 2003 Language Arts Draft Standards Sub-Committees
From: Minnesota Reads Consortium
Date: March 27, 2003

Representatives from Minnesota Reads met with Commissioner Yecke on March 12, 2003 to introduce ourselves and to share information about our consortium. Our membership is comprised of literacy faculty members from four institutions of higher education in Minnesota (University of Minnesota, St. Cloud State University, The College of St. Catherine, and Augsburg College), all of whom are engaged in research that focuses on the literacy development of K-12 students and the knowledge that novice and practicing teachers require to be effective in working with a diversity of literacy learners. We also research and develop high-quality literacy teacher preparation and inservice programs. Currently, we are engaged in a project to redesign our K-12 literacy teacher preparation programs. This work is funded by a \$1 million dollar grant from the Bush Foundation.

We want to thank Commissioner Yecke for inviting us to offer feedback on the proposed K-12 English Language Arts Standards that the four sub-committees created. As our group reviewed the draft and discussed the work you had engaged in, it became clear that we were experiencing some tension as to how best to respond. We want to be part of the process of creating high quality standards, and we understand that you and your committee members worked hard on a very challenging task. At the same time, we believe that, despite the good faith efforts of the committee members, the process has been inadequate for the task involved. The following comments address both the content of the 2003 proposed English language arts standards and the process that has been undertaken to create them.

Comments from our review of the proposed K-12 English Language Arts Standards include the following:

- There is a lack of clarity in the document about the difference between a standard, a benchmark, and a performance standard. Respected sources that guide the development of standards across the country clearly state that standards are broad summary statements about what students should know and be able to do within a discipline. Separate from standards statements, yet still linked to them are benchmarks. Benchmarks are specific descriptions of knowledge or skills that students should acquire by a particular time. Performance standards describe *levels* of student performance. The present document combines these three types of statements into one very lengthy set of “standards” statements. This is a critical problem that needs to be addressed.
- The underlying philosophical framework about literacy is not clear. This framework is critical—it evolves from research and careful discussions about how children learn to read, write, talk, and view; it relates to how these abilities and skills should be developed and when; it denotes how particular knowledge should be built early on in a child’s development and then revisited in more sophisticated and scaffolded ways; it takes into consideration the diversity of language learners in our Minnesota schools and the various

socioeconomic backgrounds of our learners. Without a careful framework, a set of standards lacks focus, coherence, and quality

- Important terms such as *text* are not clearly defined, indicating that the current research literature in this area has not been used in the document.
- The writing standards do not reflect an in-depth understanding of the writing process. They overemphasize spelling and grammar. This is inconsistent with the research of the last three decades. This is not to suggest that spelling and grammar are not important—they are. But the research clearly indicates how skills and knowledge should be developed.
- Many expectations have been placed at inappropriate grade levels, particularly at the primary level. Attention to research on child development and literacy development is needed to address this issue.
- Some statements are too specific (e.g., “Experience working with the 45 (average) phonemes of the English language...”) while others are too general (e.g., “Read and interpret informational materials.”).
- The literature standards ignore diverse perspectives in favor of a classical canon. This is inconsistent with the increasing diversity of our student population.
- The comprehension strand does not reflect the research of the past 25 years. In particular, the recent work of the RAND Report that focuses on comprehension is missing.
- Motivation and engagement are not addressed, despite research demonstrating their importance to reading achievement.
- Articulation across levels is often not clear (e.g., a skill that is listed at an upper level does not have the prerequisite knowledge developed at preceding levels).
- The diverse nature of the learners in our state is not addressed. Attention to English language learners is particularly inadequate.
- Despite the list of verbs supplied to the committee at the onset of their task (“verbs that will help to identify what students should know and be able to do . . . classify, expand, identify, indicate, analyze, etc.), the proposed standards statements overwhelmingly represent lower level thinking.

Our most serious concern, however, is with the process used to develop the proposed 2003 K-12 Standards. The committee did not, and will not, have adequate time to complete a task of this magnitude. The deliberation, thoughtfulness, and collaboration necessary for this important work require a longer period of time. In addition, the representation on the committees is problematic. Reading researchers and others with specific expertise in reading development and

difficulties were not included. The committee members are also not reflective of the demographic, geographic, linguistic, racial, and cultural diversity of our state.

Further, it should be noted that Minnesota test scores are consistently above the national average. We are not in a crisis situation. For the benefit of our state's students, any process used to create new standards must be allotted time adequate to the magnitude and importance of the task. We urge the subcommittees to make use of the work that was done in 2001-2002, when groups of teachers from across the state developed proposed revisions to the standards as well as benchmarks in the area of reading. The process for developing these documents included use of feedback from Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) and a series of public meetings. We have attached these two documents. Overview information about the documents includes:

1. In the first document (the 2001-02 Draft Standards) the "current standard" is provided followed by the proposed "revised standard." The current standard is what teachers in Minnesota now use. The revised standard statements are improved, research-based statements—they are not a retooling or tweaking of the Profile. What this helpful document does provide, however, is a bridge for teachers to enable them to thoughtfully move from current foci to new and improved standards. It is also research-based.
2. In the second document (the 2001-02 Draft Reading Benchmarks), we see the work of CFL staff and teachers who spent considerable time taking the 2001-02 Draft Standards and sought to create K-12 reading benchmarks to delineate the standards statements. These benchmarks were carefully constructed at each grade level and then across grade levels. They have integrity as a complete document because of this careful process of alignment (e.g., the back and forth work done to provide consistency within and across grade levels). The group of teachers and CFL colleagues who worked on this document only had time to complete the K-12 reading benchmarks; there would need to be time to complete the other aspects of language arts development and to update the standards statements and the benchmarks to address the very latest research.

We hope that you find the review we have completed helpful. We know that you have received very detailed feedback on your 2003 document from our colleague Barbara Taylor. Barbara chose to respond in this manner. We did not feel that we could do so because we do not feel that revisions from random and numerous comments made at various Town Meetings or on the website solve the fundamental concerns we have with the 2003 proposed standards. It is not possible to edit the sort of changes that we are proposing into a document that has fundamental problems with its theoretical framework and research base.

We have individually spent many hours reviewing the 2003 proposed standards document and have met together to draft this letter. We have and will continue to offer our help and expertise to develop high quality standards that support the learning of K-12 students and the important work that educators do to help these young people learn. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important work.