

Message to Commissioner Yecke and all legislators regarding “Working Draft” of revised standards for Minnesota public schools:

As educators who are committed to high standards and who have high expectations for our own students (and for our own children who are students), we are writing in response to the Department of Education’s Working Draft of proposed Reading/Language Arts Academic Standards.

The proposed Conceptual Framework is a sound one, with its categories of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking (which includes Viewing), and Literature. Within that framework it should be possible to include all of the aspects of research-based balanced literacy instruction that currently guide our professional practices. However, we take issue with some of the standards that have been included within that framework, and we are concerned with some standards that are missing.

It is clear that the four committees whose work was combined into this draft did not reach consensus regarding the level of specificity appropriate to state standards. Of particular concern is the number of standards included for grades 6-8. For example, there are **64 reading/language arts standards listed for grade six and 73 such standards listed for grade eight**--not a manageable number to assess accurately or to guide teachers, parents, or students, particularly when viewed in the context of multiple academic areas being taught and assessed. When standards become this numerous and specific, the state is, in fact, dictating a curriculum. While most of the items listed are worthy and would be included in district outcomes and curriculum, standards need to summarize some of the expectations. For example, under Grade 7 Comprehension, you might delete items 2.2 through 2.7 since they are reading strategies included under the umbrella of item 2.1, which is an important standard.

Within every strand, specific or redundant items should be combined in this way so that the final standards will focus on key ideas related to high expectations. More examples: In the strand of Reading under Word Recognition, Analysis, and Fluency -- Kindergarten and First Grade items 1.1 and 1.2 could be replaced by “The student will demonstrate understanding of Concepts of Print.” It is not necessary to list all the items included in the widely-used Concepts of Print assessment. For Kindergarten, a statement such as “The student will demonstrate growing phonemic awareness and ability to rhyme, segment and blend sounds” could replace items 1.5 and 1.7-1.14. (Item 1.5 really describes good teaching practices, rather than a standard for students.)

We also see serious problems with the writing strand. In particular, references to the qualities of good writing beyond mechanics are missing entirely from the K-5 standards except to say that “students will write clearly and coherently.” At least the grade 6-8 standards mention some qualities of good writing under item 2.2-c, revising. The proposed grade 9-12 standards more effectively address the qualities of good writing. **These inconsistencies of format and emphasis from one grade level to the next create a serious problem. There is no coherent building of expectations from one grade level to the next in this set of standards.** In addition, we question the rigor. Second grade students are being asked only to “write sentences,” and third graders only to “write a paragraph,” which reflects dramatically **lower expectations** than our current standards and practices. We are submitting to you as an alternative model our district elementary writing outcomes, which address all of the qualities of good writing in a balanced, coherent, and sequential manner.

Also within the writing strand, the area now called “Research” needs major revision so that it will include the concepts that we have been teaching and assessing within the Inquiry Learning Area in recent years. Teachers and students have learned to take the inquiry process to a high level beginning in the primary years, and a standard such as the Grades 3-5 single standard-- “Locate information in reference material to obtain information”--does not begin to address the thinking and skills that are involved. The grades 6-8 standards still have students simply gathering information and citing sources, with no reference to evaluating resources and information or to the use of primary resources. Again, the grade 9-12 standards are preferable (though still less rigorous than we had before), but there is nothing in the K-8 standards to build the skills students will need for these high school standards.

A similar lack of cohesion can be found in the Viewing standards. None is listed for grades K-5, and then in grades 6-7 standards are introduced as if viewing were not relevant in the prior years. The first standard listed there, 3.1, really belongs more appropriately under “Research.” Viewing is then left unaddressed at grades 8-12. In our highly visual image-driven world, this area deserves more attention.

The Speaking standards have been similarly neglected in this document; those included in the Profile of Learning, particularly the CFL-revised version of these standards, could be used to fill in this serious gap.

We would also propose some changes to the grade 9-12 standards. These standards, in contrast to the others, are too general to be useful under the areas of Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary Expansion, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Viewing. We suggest that the time be taken to develop better standards within these areas, as suggested in our earlier comments, and in some cases building on the standards listed for prior grade levels. The Literature standards, however, represent an appropriate and useful level of specificity.

One other suggestion: Because students in most school districts take classes in combined grade-level groups beyond 9th or 10th grade, it would be helpful if the high school standards were listed in a combined fashion, rather than broken down by grade level. This would allow school districts to develop curricula that address the standards in various ways and would allow students and families to select from a variety of courses those that will best meet their needs in meeting these standards. Another option might be grade 9-10 standards and grade 11-12 standards, depending on the placement of state testing.

Note: Final paragraph will include statements about the desirability of drawing some of the best elements from our previous standards, looking at the extensive revisions that have been done by CFL staff this past year, and including more classroom teachers, reading specialists, writing specialists, and information about research in subsequent discussions before any final version of standards becomes law. It will end with a Thank You for taking the time to consider our comments.