

March 25, 2003

To: Commissioner Yecke and The Minnesota English/Reading Standards Committee

From: Barbara M. Taylor, Guy Bond Professor of Reading and Literacy, University of Minnesota

Subject: Review of the English/Reading Standards

As requested by Commissioner Yecke, I have completed a review of the K-12 English/Reading Standards. My recommended changes are embedded within the standards, but I will summarize my basic approach to reviewing and commenting on the standards below.

First, however, I would like to offer a few general recommendations:

- a) Make a request to the legislature to slow the process down, and if that request is approved, get additional teachers and literacy experts involved, including members from varied cultures. Make a plea that your revised work be approved as draft standards, with completed standards to go into effect in fall of 2004. I believe more time is needed to develop a quality set of research-based, well-articulated standards that cover all essential aspects of literacy learning in grades K-12 and that are generated primarily by literacy educators who are making use of their expertise. I have attempted to provide a comprehensive, research-based set of standards, as indicated in bold in the attached document, but ideally, this work would be done over the next year by an expanded Standards Committee.
- b) Provide a small number of standards (e.g., for word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, research, listening, speaking, viewing, and literature) at each grade level and provide essential indicators under each standard. I would recommend that it be the standards, not the indicators, that are put forward to be passed into law. I have provided concrete suggestions for standards in bold in the draft standards document.
- c) Strengthen the focus on high-level thinking and on literacy processes to strike a better balance between lower level knowledge and skills and higher level processes. Detailed, lower level content is over emphasized in the current draft. Research studies I have conducted over the past five years in large-scale studies across the U.S. have consistently shown that students in classrooms of teachers who stress high-level thinking are the students who show the most growth in reading and writing. Michael Knapp (1995) has also reported similar research findings as have many others.

To review the draft standards document, I read through the new proposed standards as well as those of Virginia, California, the other states that were listed on the CFL website, the standards for several other states that were recently identified as of high quality in Education Week Quality Counts, the New Standards, the revised Profiles of Learning

standards developed by a group of Minnesota educators at the request of CFL, and the Reading Benchmarks recently completed in January by CFL staff and a small group of Minnesota educators to meet US Department of Education NCLB requirements. As I worked, I pondered the concepts of a) standards versus benchmarks or indicators, b) goals for students versus realistic accomplishments for most students by the end of a given grade in school, and c) assessments that could be put in place to assess standards.

Next, I proposed the addition of standards for each set of indicators as at each grade level as was done in Virginia and California. For example, there was one very broad standard – Students will read and understand grade appropriate English language text, and for this standard there were 15 indicators listed in kindergarten under Word Recognition, Analysis and Fluency, 6 indicators under comprehension, and 4 indicators under Vocabulary. With so many indicators for Word Recognition, Analysis, and Fluency, it is hard for a kindergarten teacher to know what the basic goals should be. So I proposed a standard for this topic – The student will have developed concepts about print and phonemic awareness and have knowledge about letters and sounds. Where possible I used wording similar to the Virginia or California Standards or some other set of standards to which I had access that captured the main idea of the indicators that followed.

Then, I went through every indicator, starting at kindergarten. I engaged in 5 activities, guided by my professional judgment, knowledge of the research, and knowledge of students.

- 1) I edited indicators to sharpen the focus, to clarify a concept, or to make an indicator in line with the extensive research base in literacy.
- 2) I eliminated indicators that were redundant or not in line with research.
- 3) I added indicators that were missing, based on research.
- 4) I modified the activity a student was to be able to do a) to again be in line with research and b) to either challenge students where needed or to not set a large group of students up for failure. For example, in grade 1 I recommended that a task be changed from “Explain main idea” to “Identify main idea” since research shows that understanding main idea is a very difficult task for a first grade student. However, in grade 9, I changed wording from “identify main ideas” to “summarize main ideas” since research shows that summarizing main ideas is a very useful ability for students from grade 3 on up to be able to do to enhance their comprehension.
- 5) I proposed a reorganization of indicators so that similar types within a category (e.g, comprehension) were grouped together. For example, under comprehension there were indicators that focused on demonstrating understanding, those that focused on using strategies to enhance comprehension, and those that focused on making inferences to better understand, analyze, or evaluate what was read. This reorganization would make it easier for a teacher to understand what needed to be accomplished within comprehension within a given school year.

As much as possible, for every recommended change, I have provided a brief rationale. Where relevant, I have indicated where wording was similar to wording in the Virginia,

California, or New Standards, or the Minnesota Benchmarks. Also, proposed additions are underlined, single words that were changed are in parentheses and italics, and proposed eliminations are indicated as are indicators to be moved, modified, or subsumed into another indicator statement. At the end of a section, I offer a possible reorganization of indicators to bring greater coherence to the set.

This was a great amount of information to review in a short amount of time, but I attempted to do a thorough job. In order that my work makes sense, I would request that the entire document be distributed to committee members in its entirety. What I have proposed as standards are presented in bold. Indicators for these standards are numbered. I hope my suggestions are understandable and useful as you continue with your very important work. If you have questions for me, do not hesitate to contact me at 651-695-1578.