



Date: 10/21/09  
To: Common Core Standards Initiative Design Team  
From: Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills  
Re: Draft English Language Arts Standards  
Submitted by: Valerie Greenhill, Director of Strategic Initiatives, P21

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The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (P21) appreciates the opportunity to review the draft ELA standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

The current draft is promising; the student practices strand is headed in the right direction, and the integration of multimedia comprehension and research (application to the core) is strong. We have included suggestions that would further strengthen the draft, particularly in terms of articulating more clearly the literacies that are so critical to success in college, career and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We recognize there is a balancing act of creating “fewer clearer higher” standards, which the draft clearly aims to achieve, while also providing enough context and detail to illustrate how a standard should be interpreted and applied. We do, however, think the enduring understandings could be made much more visible.

Details follow.

**STRENGTHS:**

- **Student Practices in Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening:** P21 applauds the inclusion of the “practices standard” which includes many higher order thinking/reasoning skills (demonstrating independence, use of technology, considering context of audience/situation/purpose). HOWEVER: this section should be articulated clearly as required elements of the standard (this is done in an uneven fashion throughout).
- **The Standards for Student Performance:** Many of these indicators represent higher order thinking skills (discern, delineate, analyze, evaluate, apply). They also often refer to assessing the quality of one’s own work (self-direction) and reliance on reliable evidence (research, evaluation, information literacy), all very important competencies. See below for recommendations for improvement.

- **Multimedia Comprehension:** The inclusion of technology use and media comprehension is important and well-done (particularly in Speaking and Listening p. 3-A, and in the Application of the Core section – see next bullet).
- **Application of the Core: Research and Media:**
  - RESEARCH: P21 applauds the emphasis on research and the rich definition of it (e.g., research is not limited to a research paper or simply gathering information, but is defined as a “flexible yet systematic approach to resolving questions and investigating issues” etc.)
  - MEDIA: It is very helpful for the media element to be called out and emphasized in the English Language Arts standards. This is an important and substantial contribution to the vision for standards in ELA.

#### **SUGGESTIONS:**

- **Clarify the Document:**
  - Usability: The connections/intersections and distinctions among what appear to be the main components of the document (Student Practices, Standards for Student Performance, Standards for the Range and Content , and Application of the Core) are unclear. This results in a standards document that is at times redundant, unnecessarily complex and difficult to use. The “enduring understandings” in the standards are not clear (these appear to be alternately represented by the Student Practices section and/or the Application of the Core section). The authors appear aware of this concern since there is a “How to Read the Document” section in the beginning, and there is some attempt to cross reference certain sections with each other. Still, the overall effect is a document that is overly complex and difficult to use. The overall structure would benefit greatly from refinement if the standards are to be used effectively.
  - Title: Be more explicit about the significance of the document’s title. It is unclear whether the naming of the document is to remain “English Language Arts Standards” or whether it is, in fact, seeking to define instead the literacies that cut across all core academic subjects. This is an unclear point in the preface, compounded by the name of the document (i.e., the fact that it is titled “College and Career Readiness Standards for Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening” rather than “English Language Arts”). This ambiguity complicates our ability to provide meaningful feedback on the draft’s direction.

- **Emphasize Synthesis and Construction of Meaning:** The current standards emphasize many higher order thinking skills (discern, evaluate, apply) but appear to be weak in the area of synthesizing information and using prior knowledge to construct meaning. This is a significant weakness and should be addressed across the board--in the Practice strand, the Student Performance Strand and at the indicator level.
- **Strengthen Visibility of Career Ready Competencies:** The Student Practices and Application of the Core sections each appear to attempt to create the "overall vision" or "frame" for the content standards. However, there is a consistent lack of emphasis at the "header" or structural level in the document on career competencies like information literacy, critical thinking, problem solving and communication. While these competencies are alluded to and in some cases are explicitly addressed at the "indicator" level, the primary emphasis overall appears to be college readiness. The danger here is that the standard may appear to focus only on a student's ability to perform well in college literature/writing courses. Clearly this is a very important aspect of the standards – but it is also equally important to emphasize the role these skills play in settings other than an English Language Arts classroom, particularly in practical, applied settings outside the classroom. In other words, the articulation of "career readiness" in the standards is inadequate, particularly at the header level (the "vision" level of the document). This is important and should be addressed.
- **Include Collaboration as a Student Practice:** Collaboration is occasionally mentioned in passing, or alluded to, but these references (see page 2-A, 3-A) are thin and should be strengthened. Collaboration is too often synonymous with the use of technology – which, while important, is a limiting way to integrate this important competence (i.e., collaboration in English Language Arts may be enhanced by technology, but it certainly should not be limited to this scenario.) The current draft seems to assume that students primarily work individually with texts, rather than in collaborative, peer review/revision and project based groups (which can and should be expected, with or without the use of technology). In terms of "career readiness" for example, collaboration in the context of writing (developing shared writing goals, participating in peer-led review and revision, etc.) is particularly important.
- **Highlight Communication:** While the fundamental core knowledge and skills cover the basics of communication (reading, writing, listening, speaking), the importance of developing these competencies *in order to communicate*

*effectively in a range of practical settings in college and career* is missing and should be addressed.

- **Include References to Interdisciplinary Literacies:** Although the interdisciplinary nature of reading, writing, listening and speaking is mentioned in the preface, the current draft is notable for its lack of placeholders within the standards for interdisciplinary approaches. It is very important that the standards articulate and emphasize how the following interdisciplinary themes can and do play a role in the teaching and learning of ELA. The Partnership stresses the following interdisciplinary themes, all of which are examples of contexts in which English Language Arts content and skills can be learned and applied:
  - Civic Literacy
  - Global Awareness
  - Financial, Economic and Entrepreneurial Literacy
  - Environmental Literacy
  - Health Literacy
  
- **Integrate Creativity:** Related to the point about “construction of meaning” above, the draft’s absence of attention to creative expression and the content knowledge that goes along with this competence is notable. The ability for students to understand and employ metaphor, allusion and other types of creative expression is an incredibly important competence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The draft should consider adding this at the Practice, Performance and indicator levels throughout.
  
- **Consider Metacognition:** The ability to “learn how to learn” or self-monitor one’s own progress is another critical competence for both for career and college readiness and should be emphasized in the ELA standards. This may be integrated in the Student Practice strand under “demonstrating independence.”