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What is the Standard for State Standards? An Investigation of the State English Language Arts Standards of Colorado, Florida, Michigan, and New Hampshire

Heidi Anne Mesmer

It is no wonder that the NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee, comprising some of the most imaginative and introspective minds in the English language arts field, would eloquently encapsulate a pivotal issue in the nationwide standards dialogue. Within the group's four page position statement is tucked this truth, "Standards represent what we value (NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee, 1996, p. 2)." This brief declaration speaks to the enormous emotional investment which standards discussions involve and exemplifies the responsibility of creating standards.

As a formal participant in one state's English language arts standards group, I learned that the development of an exemplary product was only one goal of the project. Standards, viewed as perfect documents, are not living texts but static icons of educational holiness in danger of being debunked.

"The key function of any standards document is to support and encourage educators to engage in their own processes of thinking about what they value and know about learning and language (NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee, p. 10)." I learned that I had become part of a conversation and that the act of writing standards is not a conclusive accomplishment, but rather a cyclical process of continual reflection, debate, revision, improvement, and learning. As we assert the importance of lifelong learning for our students, we must also embrace the ongoing contemplation of our own frameworks and beliefs.

The release of *The Standards for the English Language Arts* written by International Reading Association (IRA) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in March of 1996, unfortunately replicated the organization of most states' existing English language arts standards. Although this timing was inauspicious for the groups constructing new state standards, it does offer a perfect opportunity to compare the work of one highly respected group with that which has naturally arisen from states around the country. This article will analyze the English language arts content standards of four states, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, and New Hampshire, in the areas of organization, style, and content, using the IRA/NCTE publication, *The Standards for the English Language Arts*, as a guide.

What is the standard for standards?

As states have written model standards and professional organizations have contributed to the venture many questions have emerged, the most important of which is — What exemplifies strong standards? The answers range from the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) very academic and concrete position, to documents which include more abstract and affective goals (Gandal, 1995). In discussing the English

language arts content standards, the work of the IRA/NCTE group is the best place to start. The IRA/NCTE group defines standards as, "Statements that define what students should know and be able to do in the English language arts (p. 2)." To this basic definition, the group adds important qualifiers and explanations which further inform the standards discussion.

In reviewing *The Standards for the English Language Arts*, along with a policy study by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), several conclusions seem warranted about the characteristics of exemplary learning standards. It appears that writing quality standards relies upon balancing opposing forces. Standards writers must weigh using documents to support a consensus with developing standards that encourage innovation. For example, the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) framed standards which were built upon both consensus and innovation. That group launched broad consensus-building efforts which also yielded cutting edge standards (CPRE, 1993). Most experts agree on the status of the NCTM standards, "While some disputes linger, the degree of acceptance NCTM has achieved is what other standard-setting groups aim to emulate (CPRE, 1993, p. 2)." The IRA/NCTE standards reflect innovative components such as a standard devoted to technology and a standard addressing the needs of Limited English Proficient students. Writers of *The Standards for the English Language Arts* also profess goals of consensus-building; "Our goal is to define, as clearly and specifically as possible, the current consensus between literacy teachers and researchers about what students should learn in the English language arts" (p. 1).

Interestingly this quote also denotes an additional balance that standards writers must strike between specificity and generality. Specificity is needed to ensure clarity and quality, but generality is necessary to accommodate many different

curricula and teachers. The IRA/NCTE document uses a glossary and precise vocabulary to promote clarity but writes standards which are applicable to learners at all levels.

CPRE makes several other recommendations about writing standards which apply to understanding the IRA/NCTE document. An exploration of the nature of the subject area is suggested as a first step (CPRE, 1993). The second step includes selecting a format which fits the idiosyncrasies of the subject area. *The Standards for the English Language Arts* explains the English language arts by giving an informative overview of their nature and presenting an interactive model. This model places the learner at the center, surrounded by areas of primary emphasis — development, content, and purpose (IRA/NCTE, 1996). The format of the IRA/NCTE document consists of four chapters, which give a brief explanation of standards, a model interpreting the teaching and learning of language arts, an explanation of twelve standards, and sets of vignettes illustrating the standards. To include pertinent information in an easily referenced format, the document includes a glossary of terms and six appendices listing the history of the project, participants, resources, and state contacts. The IRA/NCTE participant list covers hundreds of experts, teachers, state commissioners (including those of the four states being discussed), citizen groups, businesses, teachers' associations, councils, committees, minority coalitions, reviewers, and standards workshop participants. The format both communicates vital information and lends itself to the interactive nature of the language arts.

As our country has entered into the standards debate, many participants have contributed to an understanding of what comprises quality standards. In reality, these qualities include balancing tensions inherent in the process, such as consensus and innovation, and specificity and generality.

Strong standards projects start with an investigation of the nature of the discipline area and use this information to select a complementary, flexible format which matches the character of the subject area. Finally, the formation of standards should include many different professionals and organizations.

A comparison of organization

For the purposes of this work, organization will be defined as how a document is assembled including constituent parts, breakdown of parts into various levels, and layout of sections throughout the document. The organization of a document is vital because it indicates to readers the purpose and audience of a text. It also reveals subtleties of a piece, such as author perspective and the nature of the chosen topic. Organization is a crucial element in determining how user-friendly a document is, and the ease with which it accomplishes its intended purposes. In considering the organization of state standards documents, the following questions are important: 1) Does the organization of the standards document reflect an understanding of the needs of the audience/classroom teachers? (e.g., Is it user-friendly?); 2) Does the organization allow the document to easily accomplish its purposes?; 3) Does it provide ways for a reader to be generally informed as well as, specifically informed?

The organization of *The Standards for the English Language Arts* reveals its purpose, audience, and authors' perspectives. The purpose of the document is to fully clarify a consensus on best practices. The carefully crafted expository text manifests the authors' intentions to thoroughly describe the complex nature of the English language arts. Furthermore, this format fits the wide audience of national practitioners and policy makers. Purposes of precision yield an organization which is complete, but not brief. One

exception to this elaborate format is the list of the standards, which is brief and easily located.

State standards are organized somewhat differently, due partially to their distinct audiences and purposes. The purposes of state standards are more practical because they are meant to direct teachers in planning instruction. The audiences of these documents are generally teachers and local curriculum decision-makers. Thus, organization must be friendly to the time-burdened teacher. The documents of these four states, as a whole, tend to be less focused on model and theory and more focused on specific learning outcomes. Knowing that standards booklets compete with other documents in demanding a teacher's time, state standards writers do not include extensive models of English language arts learning as did *The Standards for the English Language Arts*.

However, each state does organize its standards with a brief introduction. Introductions include varying levels of explanation of the document and its uses to teachers. The New Hampshire standards, for example, use a series of questions to explain the purposes, definitions, and organization of the document. In a succinct one and one-half page explanation, the reader is given a global understanding of this state's standards (New Hampshire Department of Education [DOE], 1996). The introduction of the Colorado standards gives a one page opening about the importance of the English language arts and the goals of the standards (Colorado Department of Education [DOE], 1995). The Michigan document gives a four page introduction including a brief chronology of the project, goals, a vision statement, and an explanation of each standard (Michigan Department of Education [DOE], 1995). The Florida English language arts standards are packaged together with other content areas standards and have no introduction. The Florida Curriculum Framework, however, includes extensive

information about the standards movement, vision statements, and information about organization (Florida Department of Education [DOE], 1996). It is my opinion that the user friendly question format of the New Hampshire standards best reflects its audience of teachers and purposes of providing salient information in an accessible format.

The arrangement of the body of the document also significantly impacts the ease with which the standards accomplish their purposes. Typically the layout includes a progression from general to specific. All states frame their standards documents with broad standards applicable to all grade levels. To these standards, states add benchmarks, or specific statements of learner expectations. Benchmarks are grouped into different developmental levels (See Table 1). Though using slightly different divisions or wording, states generally divide schooling into primary, intermediate, middle and high. Michigan's levels are the most flexible, leaving specific grade level cutoffs to local school systems. Interestingly, Colorado includes an added developmental level pertaining to extensions for students. [This level is actually never labeled. The wording "extension" is chosen because each of these added benchmarks begins with the phrasing, "For students extending their skills ..." (Colorado DOE, 1995)]

Table 1
Developmental Levels of State Standards

Colorado	[K-4]	[5-8]	[9-12]	extension
Florida	[K-2]	[3-5]	[6-8]	[9-12]
Michigan	Early Elem.	Late Elem.	Middle	High
New Hampshire	[K-3]	[4-6]	[7-10]	

Several states add pieces to this basic format to better describe their standards (See Table 2). Colorado and New Hampshire add more written explanation, while the documents of Florida and Michigan are leaner. Each organization has its advantages. The more brief documents allow for quicker reading and easier use, but the more explanatory documents ensure an unambiguous understanding of the standards.

The standards for Michigan, New Hampshire, and Colorado include all the benchmarks at all levels under each standard within 1-3 pages. Each developmental level incorporates the expectations of the previous level. This organization facilitates forming a cohesive picture of expectations from one developmental level to the next. The reader comes away, not only with knowledge of what is expected at his/her level of instruction, but also with the scope and sequence of a standard and how specific expectations fit into the larger picture. Michigan's layout of benchmarks is extremely helpful in accomplishing a global understanding of expectations. Benchmarks under a given standard are aligned horizontally from one level to the next, so that the reader need only follow straight across the page to see the progression of a standard from early elementary through high school. This arrangement lends itself to increasing communication across grade levels.

The Florida document, *The Sunshine State Standards*, makes understanding the scope and sequence of a standard more challenging. *The Sunshine State Standards* includes all standards for all subject areas in one developmental packet. For example, math, science, English language arts, and other subject areas are all included in a K-2 or 3-5 packet. This has obvious advantages for the classroom teacher, who is most likely a generalist, but it inhibits understanding the

progression of one standard through several developmental levels. The Curriculum Framework does group the benchmarks of all levels under each standard. However, each page contains only 1-3 benchmarks, requiring the reader to flip between 5-10 pages to understand the scope and sequence of only one standard.

Table 2
Layout of State Standards

<u>Colorado</u>	<u>Florida</u>	<u>Michigan</u>	<u>New Hampshire</u>
Numbered standard	Subject area title	Numbered and labeled standard	Purpose
Expanded standard	Numbered standard	Numbered benchmarks	Numbered standard
Rationale	Benchmarks		Bulleted proficiency standards

Three key features of organization are found to enhance the purposes of standards documents. First, an introduction with a brief explanation of the uses, purposes, definitions, and organization of the document guides the reader. Second, developmental divisions, must be included to address the needs of a wide age-range of learners. Finally, the arrangement of benchmarks under a standard should allow a means by which the user can easily see the scope and sequence of a standard.

A comparison of style

An analysis of the style of standards focuses on how standards are written. The word choice and sentence structure of standards both point to the degree to which standards are concrete, integrated, and flexible. The following questions are relevant to comparing standards in terms of stylistic influences: 1) How does the style of the document reflect

attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning?; 2) Within the confines of many restrictions, how do state documents differ in style?

The IRA/NCTE's standards are marked by certain stylistic choices which reveal beliefs about learning and teaching. Foremost, *The Standards for the English Language Arts* is respectful of teachers and students. Standards are concrete in expectations for students but not restrictive. Detailed content, when mentioned specifically, is written in parenthetical expressions to illustrate a concept or give examples of a term. For example, Standard 2 is written, "Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g. philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience (IRA/NCTE, 1996, p. 3)." A great deal of flexibility is allowed in this standard because the teacher is not being told prescriptively what to teach but is being asked to use his/her own expertise to expose students to high quality literary choices. Other standards are also broad, not narrowly calling for one specific learning strategy but instead expecting that students use many strategies, texts, and processes from which to learn. The IRA/NCTE standards serve as a starting place for teachers and students. In this sense, standards are not written as mandated minimal expectations by which instruction can be limited, controlled, or assessed but rather places to begin limitless learning.

Admittedly, state standards are not allowed many freedoms. Governmental agencies place requirements on these documents and assessments are built from them. However, even with such parameters, state English language arts documents do vary in their styles, showing degrees of flexibility, specificity, and integration. The Goals 2000 legislation, which has largely motivated the standards movement, defines content area standards as general statements of what a student

should know and be able to do ("Goals 2000," sec. 3, 1994). Laws typically use such subjectively defined language and this act is no different. Thus, states vary in their interpretation of the definition of standards and reflect these understandings through stylistic choices.

States' standards range in the degree of detail which is included. The standards of Florida and Colorado are stated in brief, straightforward sentences. For example, Florida Reading Standard 1 states, "Student uses the reading process effectively (Florida DOE, 1996, p. 2)." Colorado Standard 1 simply states, "Students read and understand a variety of materials (Colorado DOE, 1995, p. 2)." These types of standards are general and quickly match to a subject area within language arts. Michigan and New Hampshire's standards are more complex. The New Hampshire Reading Standard states, "Students will demonstrate the interest and ability to read age-appropriate materials fluently, with understanding and appreciation (New Hampshire DOE, 1996, p. 4)." The use of the adverb "fluently" describes the type of reading expected and the qualifiers "with understanding and appreciation" place higher expectations on the task. Michigan Standard Three, Meaning and Communication, states, "All students will focus on meaning and communication as they listen, speak, view, read, and write in personal, social, occupational, and civic contexts (Michigan DOE, 1996, p. 2)." This standard is indicative of the integrated nature of Michigan's standards. The standard includes details about the foci of reading.

Understandably, the states which wrote standards in the least specific terms, (Florida and Colorado) provide the most prescriptive and explicit listing of requirements in benchmarks. New Hampshire's proficiency standards appear to be in the middle of the continuum for specificity, while Michigan's benchmarks are the least explicit and most

flexible. Essentially, benchmarks for Florida and Colorado read as lists of skills which are to be introduced at specific developmental levels. New Hampshire's benchmarks are also list-like but the wording is more suggestive and open. Perhaps listing skills fits the perceived purposes, but, in using these documents, a teacher may feel creatively limited by the scope of each list. The exhaustive nature of the benchmarks, may also create a "coverage mentality" whereby teachers focus on covering material for accountability purposes but not on ensuring students' mastery.

Standards initially appear to be devoid of style, but when compared to each other, they show variations which exhibit attitudes towards teaching and learning. The IRA/NCTE group creates standards which are concrete but at the same time flexible. The work of this group encourages the expertise of teachers.

On the other hand, the prescriptive nature of state's standards and benchmarks reveals an attitude of "teacher proofing" the curriculum. I do not criticize those who write these state documents, for I know that state agencies, federal grant specifications, and state commissioners play powerful roles in directing the work of state committees. Committees have varying amounts of freedom and are given different perceptions of what their tasks include.

A comparison of content

Certainly no discussion of standards documents would be complete without addressing the very purpose for which they have been created; to communicate the content knowledge and skills which students should have as proficient users of the English language. Inspecting the content of standards is important because it provides a view about how state curricula match national consensus and how state curricula

compare to each other. Teachers in areas with great geographic separations, population differences, and multicultural communities, are interested in seeing how their curriculum is similar to that of other states. As reflective professionals, they are asking — Are there other ways to teach? Am I meeting the needs of my students with my present methods? Fully analyzing the content of *The Standards for the English Language Arts* or any of the state's standards, is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, this work will address essential questions relating to the content of English language arts standards such as: 1) how does the content of state standards compare to the work of the IRA/NCTE group? Do they include the same innovative ideas?; 2) What is the same and different in the content of state language arts standards? Is there a commonality to what we are teaching nationwide?

The content of the IRA/NCTE document, includes common curricular pieces which are familiar to educators nationwide. It also contains rare gems of innovation which inspire new avenues of teaching and learning. The more common content emphasis include, literature in many genres, strategies in reading and comprehension, the writing process, language conventions, and speech. Within each of the content standards are many skills pointing to the range of expectations for students. The vocabulary in these standards is second nature to most teachers. I believe that in any state, these concepts would be found in a majority of classrooms. The IRA/NCTE standards also make important statements about the future of language arts. For instance, writers of *The Standards for the English Language Arts* recognize the needs of English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and demonstrate awareness of projected increases in the number of ESOL learners. Standard 10 shows respect for the native languages of ESOL students and embraces these native languages as

means by which competency in English may be derived. Another example of innovation includes, the inclusion of a specific standard focusing on technology. Standard Eight focuses on the use of technology in promoting literacy through technological text resources, but it also addresses technology as a new area of literacy. The decision that writers made to devote an entire standard to this idea rather than integrating it into existing areas, signifies the importance placed on technology. *The Standards for the English Language Arts* also includes a standard devoted to research. Standard Seven deals with students generating questions and posing problems at all levels. This standard is also illustrated as a natural vehicle for integrating the curriculum. To support and illustrate the standards, the IRA/NCTE document includes illustrative vignettes at elementary, middle, and high school levels. These vignettes are inspired by actual classrooms. The vignettes describe student-centered classrooms and particularly emphasize interdisciplinary project, research, meaningful writing, and uses of technology.

I first compared the state standards to the IRA/NCTE standards, searching particularly for matches which addressed: ESOL students, technology, and research. None of the states made mention of ESOL learners within their English language arts standards. It can be validly argued that certain states do not include a standard pertaining to ESOL students because their population does not reflect this need. However, even the state that has a large ESOL population, Florida, does not address the unique needs of ESOL students within a specific standard. States did include information on technology and research. While states did not write standards specifically focused on technology, all included components of technology within standards and benchmarks. Usually technological resources considered types text are included. Technology is also mentioned as a means of communication or writing.

The inclusion of research is also found at varying levels. Michigan is the only state which has a standard on research. Its Standard Eleven is called Inquiry and Research (Michigan DOE, 1996). New Hampshire and Colorado have standards (Standard Five for both states) which appear to imply research but do not specifically mention it (Colorado DOE, 1995; New Hampshire DOE, 1996). Florida makes mention of research skills within the writing standards and benchmarks (Florida DOE, 1996).

Essentially, in all of these areas, except ESOL, states include information which matches the innovative ideas of the IRA/NCTE standards. I found it interesting that these four states, which are geographically separated and which reflect varying populations, would have so many areas of content similarity in their standards documents. By and large, the different states value many of the same concepts and skills. In the area of reading, all states emphasized the use of varied strategies in decoding and comprehension. All included information on main idea, fact and opinion, literary terminology, wide reading of classic and contemporary literary genre, and the construction of meaning from text. In the area of communication, all states included the writing process and conventions of language. In addition, states wrote standards in the areas of listening, speaking, and viewing. Generally the information included within standards is very much the same.

Interestingly, differences emerge in the degree of detail included in each area and in the amount of integration. Occasionally, states include unique concepts or treatments of topics. Michigan's standards are the most atypical in that many of the traditional English language arts — reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing are integrated throughout the standards. The Michigan standards focus on broad

goals and incorporate the language arts in reading these goals. Take, for example, Standard Eight, Genre and Craft of Language, "all students will explore and use the characteristics of different types of texts, aesthetic elements, and mechanics — including text structure, figurative and descriptive language, spelling, punctuation, and grammar — to construct and convey meaning (Michigan DOE, 1996, p. 2)." Embedded within this standard are reading and literature goals, language conventions skills, and writing. Michigan's document is less prescriptive and more flexible. An example of this very point, is the manner in which this state address conventions of language. Whereas most states include detailed lists of grammatical skills which students should attain at certain levels. Michigan is more broad. Under Standard 2 Meaning and Communication (Michigan DOE, 1996), students must write grammatically correct sentences, but details of grammatical skills are far less extensive than Colorado's Standard Three which includes correct pronoun case, regular and irregular verbs, and subject-verb agreement in comparisons (Colorado DOE, 1996) Florida and New Hampshire also include more specific lists of grammatical skills. Colorado blends conventional uses in writing with the same in speaking, with Standard Three reading, "Students write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling (Colorado DOE, 1996, p. 5)." It is challenging to understand how correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling can be used in speech.

In other areas, states differ in content. Florida includes a unique standard addressing the more aesthetic elements of language. Language Standards 1 and 2, state, "The student understands the nature of language. The student understands the power of language (Florida DOE, p. 2)." The focus of these standards seems to pertain to patterns in language, word choice, figurative language, etymology, formality, and use of

language in media. Although other states make mention of these elements, they do not address their study in a separate standard. The importance of critical thinking is brought out in the standards of Michigan, Colorado, and Florida. Michigan has composed a critical standard (Standard 12) which relates a student's formation and use of existing criteria for evaluation (Michigan DOE, 1996, p. 3). The standard of Colorado, (Standard 4) centers on using critical thinking skills in the English language arts (Colorado DOE, 1995, p. 6). Florida's literature, Standard 2 focuses on critical response to literature (Florida DOE, 1996, p. 2). Finally, two states, have standards which relate to application. Michigan has a standard called, Ideas in Action, which involves applying knowledge of the English language arts and New Hampshire's Standard 7 involves applying English language arts in a variety of settings.

Conclusion

This exploration of the English language arts standards of these four states and the IRA/NCTE shows that standards reflect only a small part of what is going on in the classroom. No matter how artfully written, or carefully organized, standards are limited in their abilities to impact students.

However, I have found that standards reveal more than they appear to, and involve a delicate balance of several forces. The Standards for the English Language Arts, is a document which cleverly balances such forces and serves as an exemplary model. Its organization, style, and content, match well its audience and purpose.

Each element of a standards document contributes to a unified whole which reveals the values of the writers. The organization of state documents plays an important role in reflecting both uses and audiences. Style tends to indicate

attitudes about teaching and learning, while content and degree of specificity in content reveal a balance between innovation and consensus. Standards are documentation of what we, as teachers, value and are best used as a means to begin meaningful discussions of our practice.

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