

**CHALLENGING STANDARDS IN ENGLISH:  
Are High Schools Missing Essential  
Content?**

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## PREFACE

This report is one in a series of reference documents designed especially to assist educators who are directly involved in the revision and improvement of content standards. It presumes a basic understanding of the purposes for standards and the process of standards review and evaluation. This report may be of interest to curriculum directors, other educators, and policymakers who are working to ensure that the English standards they hold for high school graduates are adequate to satisfy the expectations of post-secondary institutions and employers. Readers who would like more background and context for the work described here should consult *A Technical Guide for Revising or Developing Standards and Benchmarks* (Kendall, 2001).

This report focuses attention on the knowledge and skills in English that recently have been identified as important for success beyond high school. The report examines whether state and national standards for high school students identify the content that two recent reports (Conley, 2003, & American Diploma Project, 2004) argue is necessary for students to be successful in post-secondary work or education. Based on the expectations outlined in these reports, McREL analysts compared national and highly rated state documents that describe what students should know and be able to do by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade against documents that describe the knowledge and skills that incoming college students should acquire to be successful in their first year of college.

McREL found that, for the most part, state and national standards adequately incorporate the content identified as important for post-secondary work or education. There are differences, however, in terms of the emphasis and level of detail accorded some topics (see Table 1, pg. 8). State policymakers, curriculum directors, and other educators might consider reviewing the standards they hold for graduating high school students to determine whether these emphases are present.

## INTRODUCTION: RISING EXPECTATIONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL

In the last decade, public discourse on college-readiness has undergone a subtle but significant shift. Discussions that once focused on what college-bound students should know now center on what all high school students should know to be adequately prepared for post-secondary work. Economists, parents, their children, and educators have somewhat differing points of view, but they appear to share a concern that high schools should ensure that students possess all the knowledge and skills they need for continued learning beyond high school. Economists and others argue that the knowledge and skills students acquire in high school alone are not sufficient for continuing success, and that at least some post-secondary training is necessary. As researchers Carnevale and Desrochers (2003) demonstrate, even if students do not graduate from college, attending some college has a significant impact on future success:

The fastest-growing and best-paying jobs have been those that require at least some college. Currently, six in ten jobs are held by workers with at least some postsecondary education or training, compared with two in ten in 1959. (p. 3)

Further, those who do not graduate from college face an ever-growing loss of opportunity and potential income over the course of a lifetime:

Since the 1980s, the real inflation-adjusted earnings of male high school graduates and dropouts have declined precipitously....Overall, the earnings of college-educated workers, compared with high school-educated workers, have increased from about 43 to 62 percent since 1979, in spite of the fact that the supply of college-educated workers has doubled over the same period. (p. 3)

Factory jobs, which were once a haven for high school dropouts, are now increasingly taken by those with some college experience. Between 1973

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and 2000, the proportion of factory jobs held by individuals with at least some college education tripled and their wages held nearly steady, while those with a high school diploma or less saw their wages decline (Barth, 2003). It is not surprising, then, that in the public's mind a college education has replaced the high school diploma as the gateway to the middle class (Immerwahr, 2000). From a broader perspective, it is not simply that individual students lose a brighter economic future if they are unprepared

to continue their education. Carnevale and Desrochers (2003) present the case that continued international competitiveness and the economic well-being of the U.S. relies upon a system that prepares college-educated workers.

Students and their parents share a view that all graduating high school students should be prepared for education beyond high school. Parents have higher educational aspirations for their children than ever before: 86 percent of parents want their children to pursue some postsecondary education (U.S. Census, 2003). Hispanics and African Americans have lower

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participation rates in higher education than the population as a whole, but, in fact, the parents of Hispanic and African American students are significantly more likely than whites to emphasize the value of higher education, not less (Immerwahr, 2000). Students' expectations are likewise high. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics found that 82 percent of high school sophomores expect to continue their education beyond high school (Ingels & Scott, 2004).

Clearly, it is important that these students and their parents understand what must be accomplished to meet college entrance requirements. Yet, according to a recent report from Stanford University's Bridge Project (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003), one of the most common student misconceptions about college readiness is that meeting high school graduation requirements prepares them for college. This misconception may have its roots in the commonly held belief that readiness for college is the rightful expectation of every graduating high school student.

Interest in implementing a system of education that encompasses kindergarten through at least grade 16 has been growing rapidly. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001) urges the development of a system in which "standards, curriculum, and assessment efforts are integrated" and postsecondary education and K-12 are more closely linked (p. 5). A strong linkage and seamless transition between high school graduation and college entry must form part of any such unified system of education. More than a dozen organizations are currently working to advance the move from a K-12 to a K-16 system.

America's commitment to universal public education now appears to embrace the proposition that all students deserve an education that will ready them for success in their post-secondary years, even if their paths should take them directly to the world of work. Under such a view, students might well opt out of college, but their high school diploma should signify that they are fully prepared to attend. Such a perspective has a tradition, having been articulated late in the 19th century when the Committee of Ten, a National Education Association task force charged with bringing coherence to the

high school curriculum and establishing uniform college entrance requirements, issued the following recommendation:

[The Committee of Ten] unanimously declare that every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease. (National Education Association, 1893, p. 17)

A significant legacy of the Committee of Ten's work was the development of the Carnegie unit, which early on was defined as a course of five periods each week for one academic year. As the Committee of Ten's work illustrates, the belief that all students should be prepared to enter college is not new. What is new is that this view now appears within the context of a standards-based system. A standards-based system – one in which the knowledge and skills that students should acquire are clearly articulated – provides a means for communicating specific expectations for students. This level of detail is not available in the Carnegie unit, the commonly used metric for describing high school accomplishment. Although the Carnegie unit is said to include a description of what students should learn, it has come under mounting criticism, most notably for its frequent use as a meaningless label of course content, for equating a high school diploma with earned seat time, and for creating an inflexible course structure (Maeroff, 1993). The idea that led to the Carnegie unit, however, gains greater focus and likelihood of success in a standards-based system. In order to integrate high school expectations with college admission requirements, clear statements of what students should be learning must be shared by both educational institutions.

## WHAT'S NEEDED FOR SUCCESS BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL?

Post-secondary institutions and other organizations have recognized a gap between what is expected from high school students and the requirements for post-high school learning. Post-secondary institutions have found that high school graduates arrive less adequately prepared than they have in the past. To address this problem, many of these institutions offer remedial courses in reading, writing, and mathematics. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines postsecondary remedial education as “courses in reading, writing, or mathematics for college-level students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work at the level required by the institution” (Parsad & Lewis, 2003, p. iii). A recent NCES study of remedial education reports:

Between 1995 and 2000, the proportion of institutions that reported an average of 1 year of remediation for [incoming] students increased from 28 percent to 35 percent, while the proportion indicating an average of

less than 1 year of remediation for students decreased from 67 percent to 60 percent. (Parsad & Lewis, 2003, p. iv)

Thus, not only are more students requiring remediation, but the amount of time they require for remediation has increased. Clearly, post-secondary institutions have a strong interest in whether high school graduation standards adequately describe the knowledge and skills that college-bound students need in order to be fully prepared. It seems logical to suppose that post-secondary remediation rates would decrease if there were a well-defined and agreed-upon set of high school standards that accurately reflect the knowledge and skills students need to succeed at the post-secondary level.

Two organizations in particular have undertaken the task of communicating what post-secondary institutions and the world of work expect of high school graduates. One notable effort to meet the need for a clearer connection between high school courses and university expectations is Standards for Success, a project sponsored by the Association of American Universities in partnership with The Pew Charitable Trusts. One of the project's primary goals was to identify what graduating high school students need to know and be able to

do in order to succeed in entry-level university courses. These student expectations, termed Knowledge and Skills for University Success, are presented in *Understanding*

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*University Success* (Conley, 2003), the product of a two-year study in which more than 400 faculty and staff members from 20 research universities participated in extensive meetings and reviews. The disciplines covered included English, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, second languages, and the arts.

The American Diploma Project (2004) shares a similar purpose – connecting secondary and postsecondary expectations for success – but its focus is on “what it takes for graduates to compete successfully beyond high school – either in the classroom or in the workplace” (p. 1). The Project, a partnership of Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, spent nearly two years working with two- and four-year postsecondary faculty and front-line managers in high-growth, high-skill occupations to define the core knowledge and skills that high school graduates need in order to be ready to succeed in their organizations. The results of the study are presented in *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (ADP, 2004), which describes student expectations, termed benchmarks, for English and mathematics. The report also includes sample workplace tasks and post-secondary assignments, which illustrate in real terms how the knowledge and skills captured in the benchmarks might be applied beyond high school, whether in the workplace or in the college classroom.

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

In light of these two recent project reports, which outline what high school graduates should know and be able to do, McREL set out to determine whether the K-12 community currently shares these expectations for students, or if these reports appear to raise the bar for high school graduates. This information will be useful to policymakers, state and district curriculum directors, and others who are interested in determining whether the standards they hold for graduating high school seniors meet the expectations of post-secondary institutions or of organizations that employ students with some college education. To address this question, McREL analysts compared the expectations described for students in these two reports with current national standards for English, and state standards documents considered to be of high quality. For standards at the national level, analysts reviewed the following nationally recognized documents:

- *Performance Standards: English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Applied Learning, Volume 3, High School* (New Standards, 1997)
- *Reading Framework for the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (National Assessment Governing Board, 2005)
- *Standards for the English Language Arts* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1996)
- *Standards for Excellence in Education* (Council for Basic Education, 1998)
- *Standards in Practice: Grades 9-12* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1996)
- *Writing Framework and Specifications for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (National Assessment Governing Board, 1998).

The English content identified in the American Diploma Project and Standards for Success reports also was compared to the high school English language arts standards in documents from states highly rated by national organizations for the quality of their standards (Kendall, Snyder, Schintgen, Wahlquist, & Marzano, 1999). Three evaluation reports were used to help select these state documents:

- *Making Standards Matter* (American Federation of Teachers, 1998), which includes ratings of the state standards in terms of specificity and clarity.
- *State English Standards: An Appraisal of English Language-Arts/Reading Standards in 28 States* (Stotsky, 1997), published by the Fordham Foundation.

- *Great Expectations: Defining and Assessing the Rigor in State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts* (Berman & Joftus, 1998), published by the Council for Basic Education.

Although a variety of state standards documents have been highly rated for their language arts standards, the current editions of the five state documents highly rated by all three organizations were selected:

- *English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* (1998), by the California Department of Education
- *Language Arts Standards: Reading* (2003, March), by the Arizona Department of Education
- *Language Arts Standards: Writing, Speaking & Listening* (1996), by the Arizona Department of Education
- *Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools: English Standards of Learning* (2002, November), by the Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia
- *The English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* (2001, June), by the Massachusetts Department of Education
- *Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards for English Language Arts* (1999), by the State of Wisconsin, Department of Public Instruction

Since these ratings appeared in the mid 1990s, no comparable, multiple-organization review of all state standards documents has been conducted. In order to include standards documents that are widely endorsed for their quality, this report is limited to the most recent editions of documents reviewed in the mid 1990s. Given our familiarity with state standards over the last 10 years, as well as a comparison of the rated documents against their more recent editions, we believe that these documents fairly represent the current state of content standards in the English language arts. For this study, then, standards documents that were highly rated by multiple organizations some time ago, but not significantly different from their current editions, were selected over documents that have been highly rated more recently, but by just a single organization.

Analysts examined each statement of knowledge or skill described in *Understanding University Success*, published by the Standards for Success project (Conley, 2003), and the benchmarks identified in *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*, published by the American Diploma Project (2004), and compared them to national and state standards.

## FINDINGS

Our analysis indicates that the English language arts content that has been identified as important for those entering post-secondary education and the world of work is present in both national standards documents and the highly rated state standards documents used in this study. The expectations that states and national subject area groups establish for high school students in the study of English appear to be sufficient for their entry into post-secondary and the world of work. Of course, whether high schools have established sufficient support systems to ensure that students reach these expectations is an important question for policymakers and educators to consider, but one that lies outside the scope of this study.

While state and national standards adequately incorporate the content identified as significant by the Standards for Success and

American Diploma Project studies, there are differences in emphasis and detail that may be of interest to educators. For the most part, these differences fall under the category of critical analysis.

*Whether high schools have established sufficient support systems to ensure that students reach these expectations is an important question.*

As shown in Table 1, both the Standards for Success and American Diploma Project reports suggest the need for students to gather and cite information from the Internet and to understand the distinction between deductive and inductive thinking. The American Diploma Project goes beyond these expectations to explicitly require other aspects of logical thinking and writing: distinguishing evidence and inferences and evaluating and reporting claims; identifying false assumptions and premises; and distinguishing between a summary and a critique. Standards for Success indirectly supports these expectations and further requires that students identify claims in their writing that require outside support, and that students be able to make connections between parts of a text and its larger theoretical structures. Providing students with a strong grounding in these important skills will likely increase their readiness for college or the workplace.

**Table 1. Specific Emphasis or Detail Absent from State or National Documents**

	English Expectations for Post-secondary Incoming Students		State and National Standards for 9-12 English Language Arts	
	American Diploma Project	Standards for Success	Present in National Standards Documents	Present in Highly Rated State Standards Documents
Distinguish among... evidence and inferences; evaluate connections among evidence, inferences and claims <sup>1</sup>	yes	not explicitly stated	no	not explicitly stated
Identify false premises in an argument <sup>1</sup>	yes	not explicitly stated	not explicitly stated	not explicitly stated
Analyze communications for false assumptions... and faulty reasoning. <sup>1</sup>	yes	not explicitly stated	not common	yes
Analyze two or more texts addressing the same topic to determine how authors reach similar or different conclusions <sup>1</sup>	yes	not explicitly stated	not common	not common
Distinguish between a summary and a critique <sup>1</sup>	yes	not explicitly stated	not explicitly stated	not explicitly stated
Understand the distinction between a deductive argument... and inductive reasoning <sup>1</sup>	yes	yes	not common	yes
Demonstrate an ability to make connections between the component parts of a text and the larger theoretical structures... <sup>2</sup>	no	yes	no	not common
Identify claims in their writing that require outside support or verification. <sup>2</sup>	no	yes	not explicitly stated	not explicitly stated
Gather and cite information from the Internet <sup>2</sup>	yes	yes	not common	not explicitly stated
Identify the primary elements of the types of charts, graphs and visual media that occur most commonly in texts. <sup>2</sup>	yes	yes	not explicitly stated	not explicitly stated

<sup>1</sup> Source: American Diploma Project

<sup>2</sup> Source: Standards for Success

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In order to determine if the expectations that post-secondary institutions and the workplace hold for graduating students are embodied in highly rated state standards and national standards in the English language arts, McREL compared expectations for high school graduates with post-secondary requirements for incoming students. The analysis showed that the English language arts content identified as important for post-secondary schooling and the world of work for the most part does indeed appear in state and national standards documents; however, there are some differences in detail or emphasis in a few topics. That is, the reports published by the American Diploma Project and the Standards for Success project place somewhat stronger emphasis on critical analysis. Educators and policymakers may want to review the standards they hold for graduating high school students in order to determine whether this emphasis is present.

There are a number of reasons that the transition from high school to post-secondary work can be difficult for students. This study has focused on one of the more straightforward questions that can be addressed in order to make this transition easier: by ensuring that state standards for high school students adequately prepare them for postsecondary education or the workplace. This approach takes advantage of the clarity and specificity standards afford as a means for communicating expectations about what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from high school. If the vision of a K-16 education system is to become a reality, secondary and post-secondary institutions would be well advised to communicate more directly to adopt standards as a formal means of identifying their shared expectations for students.

*Educators and policymakers may want to review the standards they hold for graduating high school students.*

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