

Sharing Common Ground: Texas and the Common Core State Standards

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Abstract

When browsing through professional catalogs or attending national conferences, one cannot help but notice the growing emphasis on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). So, what does this mean for Texas teachers? As part of a special four-part series in our Texas Journal of Literacy Education, a special task force from the TALE Board will share the common ground among the CCSS, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS). Here, we begin part one of this series by briefly discussing the history of this national movement and the creation of our own state standards. Throughout the series, we will discuss the commonalities and differences among the various sets of standards and how they each address student outcomes for developing skills for both writing and reading.

Texas is often cited as the birthplace of educational standards and accountability systems using high-stakes testing. When former governor, George W. Bush became President of the United States, Texas' accountability movement became the foundation of No Child Left Behind, the most influential national education legislation since Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Frontline, n.d). Recently, the nation was presented with yet another high profile effort to improve education when President Barack Obama and Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as part of the charge for all American children to have a "world class education". With

many similarities to its predecessors, the ESEA features the following three goals (Department of Education [DOE], 2010):

- Raising standards for all students in English language arts and mathematics;
- Developing better assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards; and
- Implementing a complete education through improved professional development and evidence-based instructional models and supports.

The reauthorization of ESEA, informed by lessons learned from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has led to a nation

united in one common goal —preparing students to be successful in postsecondary education or a career once they complete high school. The National Governors Association (NGA) Center and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2010) explain that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are “designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers” (“Mission Statement”, para. 1). Involvement and adoption of the CCSS is voluntary as is how and to what degree each state implements the standards. An adopting state agrees to adopt the CCSS in its entirety, but additional standards may be determined by the state so that at least 85% of their standards will be the entirety of CCSS and 15% customized to the state (Lewin, 2010). As a result, although the core is common, there is flexibility and opportunities for differentiation for each state. As of December 2013 forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Educational Activity have adopted the CCSS. Of this participating group, some of these adoptees, such as Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Utah, have opted out of the testing consortiums that have accompanied the CCSS (Bidwell, 2013). Among those states that have not adopted the CCSS are Minnesota, Nebraska, Virginia, Alaska, and Texas.

The decision to abstain from adopting the CCSS has left many Texans wondering— Why? To help better understand this decision, the first article of the series will present the histories of

the standards driving both our state’s and the Common Core State Standards’ educational goals. This historical perspective and foundational knowledge will help to set the stage for future discussions on the commonalities and differences among the various sets of standards and how literacy outcomes are addressed.

History of Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) is known to most Texas teachers as the grade-by-grade, subject-specific state standards that outline what Texas students should know and be able to perform. However, the creation of the TEKS is often times less known. Our brief historical explanation of the TEKS travels back to the early 1980s — the time frame when the current educational reform movement at both the national and state level was launched.

Nationally, the report titled, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission of Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983) was released by the Reagan administration in 1983. This report indicated that after concentrated emphasis on education following the Space Race and Sputnik reforms of the 1960s, the nation had become complacent and had fallen behind internationally. This report became the catalyst upon which the school reform movement began with recommendations for change in the following five areas: curriculum content, standards and expectations of students, time devoted to education, teacher quality, and educational

leadership and the financial support of education. Among these five recommendations, two specifically informed the state-standards movement with energy and urgency — curriculum content and standards for expectations of students’ learning outcomes (US Department of Education, 2008).

Interestingly, two years prior to the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the Texas legislature mandated an upgrade to the state curriculum, and by 1984 the Texas Board of Education passed its first state-mandated and standardized curriculum, the Essential Elements (Bridgman, 1984). In terms of the curricular reform ignited by *A Nation at Risk*, Texas was already working towards clear and specific state standards and curriculum content. By 1997, the Essential Elements were revised and renamed, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, to reflect a more specific and rigorous set of standards. Since then, the English Language Arts (ELA) TEKS were revised beginning in the 2007-2008 school year, completed and approved in 2009, and introduced to teachers through professional development in Spring and Summer of 2011 for implementation beginning with the 2011-12 school year.

Creating and Revising the TEKS

So who writes or revises the Texas standards and how are they determined? The English Language Arts (ELA) TEKS were the first set of standards to go through the revision process since the original change from Essential Elements to TEKS in 1997. From the 2007-2008 onset of the first

review, the process has been revised and refined as other subject areas have undergone their review process. The Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2011) makes the process public through listserves, presentations, and public meetings so that educators, parents, business leaders and any interested citizen has the opportunity for input along various junctures during the process. Currently, revising the TEKS is a four year process that is scheduled on a six year cycle, with the next round of revisions due the spring of the 2014-15 school year (TEA, 2012b).

The initial review of the TEKS is made by an expert review panel nominated by members of the State Board of Education (SBOE). To be considered for this panel, one must have an earned bachelor’s degree or higher, have demonstrated expertise in the subject area under review, and either taught or worked in the subject area or field under review. Each SBOE member may nominate one expert reviewer and an expert reviewer must receive two nominations to be considered for the panel. Once the expert review panel has been established, the Texas Education Agency sends the current TEKS to them for initial review, feedback, and recommendations. When the expert review panel has made their recommendations, their work is sent to a TEKS review committee comprised of “educators, parents, business and industry leaders and employers” (TEA, 2011). This committee, which is also nominated by the SBOE, is charged with supporting the SBOE in meeting the requirements associated with the revision process and

reviewing the recommendations from the expert panel. The SBOE requires the TEKS review committee to utilize the expert review panel recommendations while implementing the following (TEA, 2011):

- use the current TEKS as the foundation document;
- consider the general course of study, rather than advanced course options;
- consider College and Career Readiness Standards while revising the TEKS;
- ensure the revisions comply with related statutes;
- provide justifications for all suggested revisions; and
- track all revisions to show what has been changed.

The TEA staff manages the documents and prepares drafts reflecting the TEKS review committee recommendations. There is a back and forth process of review, feedback, revision between the expert review panel and the TEKS review committee. The SBOE invites testimony from the expert panel and representatives of the review committee and then TEA staff prepares a rule draft that is presented in a two public hearings and online for a 30 day public review and comment. TEA compiles and summarizes the public comments. The SBOE considers the public feedback and considers amendments. During the next SBOE scheduled meeting amendments are considered, a second reading of the standards document with any approved amendments is completed, the

standards are adopted and the implementation date is determined.

Organization of the TEKS

The English Language Arts and Reading TEKS (2012b) are organized into the following strands:

- Reading, where students read and understand a wide variety of literary and informational texts;
- Writing, where students compose a variety of written texts with a clear controlling idea, coherent organization, and sufficient detail;
- Research, where students are expected to know how to locate a range of relevant sources and evaluate, synthesize, and present ideas and information;
- Listening and Speaking, where students listen and respond to the ideas of others while contributing their own ideas in conversations and in groups; and
- Oral and Written Conventions, where students learn how to use the oral and written conventions of the English language in speaking and writing (p.1).

The Reading strand is structured to reflect the major topic areas of the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Additionally, the ELA section described in the TEKS has been created to meet the Texas Education Code for Public Education Academic goals section 4.002 which states, "The students in the public education system will demonstrate exemplary performance in the reading

and writing of the English language," (Texas Constitution and Statutes, "Education Code", n.d.). Furthermore, students will accomplish the essential knowledge, skills, and student expectations for each specific grade level, which is outlined in the section titled "Knowledge and Skills".

Coinciding with the most recent revision of the ELA TEKS, was the consideration and reflection of an additional standard foci — The College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS). The CCRS outline the concepts that are to be taught in public schools to help prepare Texas students for success in the workplace or in college or university courses.

History of the College and Career Readiness Standards

The development of College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) had a forerunner called the American Diploma Project (ADP). It was a joint project launched in 2001 by an independent, bipartisan, non-profit education reform consortium of business leaders and governors called Achieve (Achieve, n.d.) in partnership with Education Trust and the Fordham foundation. This project was initiated in response to business sector concerns about the readiness of our high school graduates. Their concerns were based on university faculty and employers noticing variances in the preparedness of high school graduates and in response to research showing that up to thirty percent of high school graduates needed some type of remediation at the postsecondary level (Achieve, n.d.).

ADP aimed at more rigorous and consistent state standards so that a high school diploma would represent a more consistent educational value in terms of readiness for either college or a career. Texas was one of the initial partnering states on this project from 2002 to present, and in 2010 it was the only state identified as making full use of all indicators assessing college and career readiness (Achieve, 2010). Texas was also the first state to create and adopt College and Career Readiness Standards.

In an attempt to provide a world class education which prepares every student for success in postsecondary education or in a career, schools were provided the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB] & the Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2009). The CCRS are organized around a framework featuring multiple depths of knowledge. This framework focuses on moving beyond subject matter and towards a deeper understanding of the structure of a discipline and how knowledge expands beyond a topic. The CCRS (THECB & TEA, 2009) are organized into the following four levels:

- key content (i.e., foundational ideas of a discipline);
- organizing components (i.e., subject areas and knowledge that organize a discipline around what students should be able to achieve);
- performance expectations (i.e., knowledge and skills that exemplify significant ideas of each organizing component as well as the contexts in with each

- organizing component can be present); and
- examples of performance indicators (i.e., examples of assessment for measuring performance expectations).

The four levels listed above provide a framework for the CCRS throughout all four disciplines addressed (i.e., English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Cross-Disciplinary). In addition, THECB and TEA (2009) remind us that “generally, the more standards a student can demonstrate successfully, the more likely it is that he or she will be college and career ready” (p. iv).

Forming the CCRS in Texas

According to the THECB and TEA (2009), the creation of the CCRS began with the passing of House Bill 1 during the Third Called Special Session of the 79th Texas Legislature. With the passing of House Bill 1, also referred to as the “Advancement of College Readiness in Curriculum”, the THECB and TEA were required to establish Vertical Teams within specialized content areas. The Vertical Teams were charged with the duty to develop college and career readiness standards in the areas of English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In their effort, the vertical teams reviewed research, exemplary College and Career Readiness Standards, and other standards developed by national subject matter organizations. They also studied reports, heard expert testimony, and collaborated with secondary and postsecondary faculty.

The first draft of the CCRS was posted for public comment in October 2007 by the THECB. Concurrently, revisions were being made to the standards based on feedback from the Commission for a College and Career Ready Texas. The second (and current) draft, incorporated revisions based on the feedback of both sources. THECB and TEA (2009) describe these standards as “what students must know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level courses at postsecondary institutions in Texas” (p. iii).

How does CCRS differ from previous high school graduation standards? THECB and TEA (2009) explain that, the CCRS serve a different purpose than high school graduation standards, which typically emphasize mastery of basic skills and knowledge, and not necessarily college and career readiness....the CCRS distinguish themselves from high school standards by emphasizing content knowledge as a means to an end: the content stimulates students to engage in deeper levels of thinking (p. iii).

Preparing students for success in the workplace or in postsecondary education is a current concern for not only for the state of Texas, but also the nation. Like the CCRS, the CCSS aim to prepare students to be successful after graduating from high school.

History of the Common Core State Standards

While the CCRS set expectations for the end result, they do not address grade-

by-grade progression of student expectations. Similar to the TEKS, the CCSS *do* address grade-level expectations by describing what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. This leads to additional questions — how were the CCSS conceived, how were they developed, and how do they further differ from the TEKS and the CCRS?

Because the CCSS is a standards-based movement, they stem from the same historical events that shaped the TEKS at the national level. Most recently, the business leaders, the NGA Center, and CCSSO voiced concern about our ability to be globally competitive in the knowledge-based job market as the impetus for the creation of a set of common standards. They cite disparate standards across states as an obstacle. These governors and chief school officers saw the advantage in working together to examine international standards and the best standards of our states with the intent of more state-to-state consistency. Since all states are charged with creating more rigorous standards around the creation of high school graduates ready for careers or continued education, it made sense to create a network of shared resources which could be leveraged to create world-class learning objectives. So, these two non-partisan associations, the NGA Center and the CCSSO presented a proposal for all states to come together to develop a common set of standards aligned to various college and career readiness standards. The goal of this voluntary initiative is to provide a clear set of rigorous concepts and procedures that begin in early grades allowing time

for mastery by graduation so that all American students are prepared for college or careers when they leave their public schooling (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010).

Developing the CCSS

So how were the CCSS developed? According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative Standards-Setting Criteria, CCSS were designed to be (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010):

- Fewer, clearer, and higher, to best drive effective policy and practice;
- Aligned with college and work expectations, so that all students are prepared for success upon graduating from high school;
- Inclusive of rigorous content and applications of knowledge through higher-order skills, so that all students are prepared for the 21st century;
- Internationally benchmarked, so that all students are prepared for succeeding in our global economy and society; and
- Research and evidence-based (p. 1).

Since this was the first official effort to develop a set of shared standards, the process is not as transparent as the process for the TEKS. There is not one comprehensive document on the CCSS website that outlines this process. As co-author of the ELA Common Core State Standards and co-founder of Student Achievement Partners, Sue Pimentel, described the process of developing the CCSS as guided by three principles: (1) Each standard had to be

based on evidence of college and career readiness for literacy and mathematics; (2) The body of standards must focus on what matters most for readiness (so a small core of essential standards); and, (3) Local flexibility and teacher judgment must be maintained (NBC News, 2013).

Hired by the NGA Center and CCSS), Student Achievement Partners, David Coleman and Sue Pimentel, began the process by developing a draft during the summer of 2009 and managed the feedback and revision process throughout. Their work was supported by a work group of experts: researchers, educators from K-12, university faculty, as well as librarians. The initial draft was rejected by feedback groups and from September to November, a second draft was crafted based on more feedback from teachers and researchers. Once a more agreeable draft was completed, feedback groups were asked for additional input on the drafts, which included two 30 day periods of public comment. During this time, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) was asked to offer feedback. In an [open letter](#) to members, then president, Kyleene Beers (2009), explained that given the option to have some input or not, NCTE chose to take what little opportunity for feedback that was offered rather than have no input at all. Since CCSS adoption, both IRA and NCTE have offered guidance and support to help teachers navigate these standards. (http://www.reading.org/Libraries/association-documents/ira_ccss_guidelines.pdf)

<http://www.ncte.org/standards/commo-n-core>)

One great criticism of the development of the CCSS is the lead authorship (Burkins & Yaris, 2012; Goldstein, 2012). Although Pimentel has a degree in Early Childhood Education and law from Cornell, she has never taught. Likewise, Coleman is a Rhodes Scholar, has an advanced degree in English from Oxford and philosophy from Cambridge, but he has never taught (Burkins & Yaris, 2012; Goldstein, 2012).

Organization of the CCSS

The CCSS are comprised of the following three sections: a comprehensive K-5 section and two content area sections for grades 6-12. The first content specific section is for ELA, while the second is for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Each of these sections is then divided into strands. The K-5 and 6-12 ELA have divisions for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. Additionally, the 6-12 history/social studies, science, and technical subjects section is divided into Reading and Writing. Each of these strands are headed by a strand-specific set of College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standards. The anchor standards are intended to reflect the broader readiness expectation of a literate workforce. These anchor standards are identical across all grades and content areas; and are followed by the specific standards for each grade within grades K-8, 9-10, and 11-12. The grade-specific standards translate the broader CCR Anchor Standard into

grade-appropriate end-of-year expectations. The standards have the following key features:

- Reading: text complexity and the growth of comprehension
- Writing: text types, responding to reading, and research
- Speaking and Listening: flexible communication and collaboration
- Language: conventions, effective use, and vocabulary

Three appendices accompany the document. Appendix A contains supplementary material as well as a glossary. Appendix B consists of text exemplars illustrating the complexity and range of reading for various grade levels along with sample performance tasks. Appendix C includes annotated writing samples for various grade levels.

Texas’ Decision to Keep its Own Standards

Texas, once an independent and sovereign nation, still has a sense of independence and periodically does not follow the same decisions as other state governments. For example, as mentioned earlier, the CCSS were co-authored by the NGA Center and the CCSSO. The NGA Center is a “ bipartisan organization of the nation’s governors. Through the NGA Center, governors share best practices, speak with a collective voice on national policy and develop innovative solutions that improve state government ...” (NGA Center, 2011, Mission Statement, para. 1). The second authoring group, the CCSSO, “is a nationwide, nonpartisan, and nonprofit membership

organization. The only one of its kind organization to bring together the top education leaders from every state in the nation” (CCSS, 2013, “Our Promise”, para. 1). Keeping with our discussion of Texas periodically not following the same decisions of other state governments, it is significant to share that our state leadership is not participating in either of these two groups (Cavanagh, 2011a; Rich, 2012). In fact, Governor Rick Perry has not participated in the NGA Center since 2002 citing unnecessary spending for dues of over \$100,000 (Cavanagh, 2011a), and at the time of the development of the CCSS, our then Commissioner of Education, Robert Scott, declined participation in the CCSSO citing differences in philosophy in terms of state and local control of schools versus national control, as well as the \$60,000 membership fees (Cavanagh, 2011b). Additionally, our state leadership believes so strongly in state and local control of schools that [House Bill 462](#), passed in June of 2013, bans the adoption of the CCSS or assessments related to it and the use of its standards to provide instruction. The vote was overwhelming and bipartisan with 140-2 vote in the House, passing in the Senate as well, and signed into law by Governor Perry.

In Closing: Finding Common Ground

While exploring the CCRS, TEKS and CCSS, it is critical not to confuse the concept of standards with curriculum. Standards are the learning goals that identify what students are expected to know and do by the completion of a

particular grade, or the “what” of education. With that said, its counterpart curriculum, or the pedagogical decision making and lesson design, is the “how”. While standards *inform* the curriculum in terms of expectation, they are not the curriculum. Much of the current criticism of the CCSS is the misconception that they are a *curriculum*. Although most of the states in our nation have adopted them, they articulate learning outcomes and emphasize the professional decision making of teachers and school districts on *how* they are implemented. In news articles reporting on the CCSS or the TEKS, they are often misinterpreted as curriculum. However, states and school districts design curriculum around them.

As is evident from the discussion here, Texas is a state with a history of setting educational precedents with the intention of providing the best possible learning opportunities for its children to meet and exceed their fullest potential to enter a globally competitive workplace. The CCSS shares the same goal. By building upon the higher standards of College and Career Readiness, both sets of standards work toward organized, clear, and rigorous learning objectives.

Each set of standards has a process of feedback and revision in their development. Although we would prefer that teachers have the initial and stronger authorship, input, and decision-making, it is apparent that teachers, parents, and other stakeholders have a forum for comment.

It is also noteworthy to recognize the earnest effort by states to find a common ground to thread our nation together on an educational foundation. While still early in the implementation process, there remain hurdles to overcome and lessons to learn with the hopes of strengthening the goal to prepare all students for success in the global society of the 21st century. It is an encouraging prospect that American students would have similar learning experiences no matter where they attend school in our nation. Through the Common Core State Standards, teachers across the country have the confidence that from state to state, consistency with learning outcomes is the overarching intention. Additionally, they have the same goals when collaborating with colleagues on their campus or around the nation and the benefit of resources published around national conversations to support these goals. Such an undertaking has the potential to close many gaps found across our nation that might have previously been formed due to logistics, economics, or ideologies.

As with our own curiosities, we have found that many Texas teachers often wonder how the CCSS compares to the standards adopted by Texas and why Texas isn't part of it. Furthermore, while we acknowledge that Texas teachers and schools receiving public funds will not be using the CCSS, many of our private schools and teachers are. With all the attention placed on them, we want to be well informed. Lastly, we know that good literacy instruction is intentional and that the best prepared teachers inspire the best readers and

writers. In part two of this four part series, we will present and examine the TEKS, CCRS and the CCSS through the lens of student learning outcomes for developing skills for writing. In subsequent articles, we will examine the standards addressing student learning

outcomes for reading in respect to the topics of Close Reading and Text Complexity. We hope you'll contact us with feedback and questions you may have regarding these topics.

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