

Alabama • English Language Arts

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Alabama Course of Study: English Language Arts Including Reading. 2007.

Accessed from: <http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=54&sort=2&footer=sections>

Overview

The Alabama standards cover the critical ELA content and skills, including some essential skills that are often overlooked in state standards, such as vocabulary development, grammar, and the study of American literature. Unfortunately, while much of the essential content is included, the standards themselves could be more systematic and clearer in their detail and organization.



Clarity and Specificity: 1/3

Content and Rigor: 6/7

Total State Score: 7/10

(Common Core Grade: B+)

General Organization

The *Alabama Course of Study*, as the standards collectively are called, is organized by grade into the strands of Reading, Literature, Writing and Language, Research and Inquiry, and Oral and Visual Communication. Within each strand are standards, followed by bulleted lists of related concepts and skills. In some cases, these bullets are followed by examples. For example:

Compose narrative texts using an introductory paragraph, specific time frames, clear sequencing of events, and a conclusion...

- Using figurative language to enhance written text

Examples: simile, onomatopoeia, metaphor, alliteration...(writing and language, grade 3)

Grade-level summaries precede the standards at each grade level.

Clarity and Specificity

The organization makes it difficult to track progression of content and skills across grades, and the format of overarching statements and bullets does not work well. In general, the overarching statements cover broad swatches of content and skills, while the bullets underneath only sometimes track directly to what appears above. For example, consider the following fifth-grade writing standard:

Compose expository texts using an introductory paragraph that includes a main idea; supporting paragraphs with a minimum of three reasons, explanations, or steps in a process; and a conclusion.

- Determining purpose and audience prior to writing
Examples: purpose—writer addresses topic in correct mode;
audience—writer uses appropriate tone
- Demonstrating clarity and organization in a composition
- Using appropriate transition words in a composition
- Using appropriate prewriting strategies
Examples: brainstorming, using graphic organizers

- Composing persuasive texts, including a minimum of three reasons that support a stance or position
- Composing narrative texts using a definite time frame, a clear sequence of events, and a selected tone
Examples: selected tone—sarcastic, humorous, respectful
- Composing descriptive texts using an introductory paragraph, sensory details, vivid language, and a conclusion
- While the focus here is ostensibly on expository texts, other types of writing are also referenced in the bullets, making it difficult to understand what the focus really is (grade 5)

In other places, the language is simply difficult to understand. One second-grade reading standard states, “Exhibit vocabulary skills, including explaining simple common antonyms and synonyms and using descriptive words.” The standard itself is weak, exhorting the student as if by fiat to “exhibit vocabulary skills.” This standard also needs to be bolstered with examples of how to create and strengthen vocabulary, rather than bullet points that are scattered in different directions, e.g., “responding to questions” and “recognizing possessive forms.” Also, the meaning of the first-grade Reading standard, “recognizing words in the environment,” is elusive. The *word* is not in the environment; its referent is.

In some cases, the standards are just confusing, as is often the case for the writing and language standards. Although much good content is ultimately addressed, it gets lost in organizational weaknesses. For example, the treatment of clauses is scattered across different grade levels and mixed with other writing skills, making it difficult to track a coherent progression.

For these reasons, the standards earn one point out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Content and Rigor

Content Strengths

Alabama’s K-2 (primary) standards do a good job of covering the important elements of phonemic awareness and other early reading content and skills identified in the criteria. The elementary standards also address vocabulary development, although they could be improved by better emphasizing etymology and dictionary skills.

The Reading and Literature standards do a commendable job of calling out specific literary genres, elements, and devices. In addition, the standards include recommendations about the quality and complexity of reading by appending sample reading lists organized by genre and grade level. Finally, standards writers attempt to address American literature specifically in several places at the high school level, as in the following tenth-grade standard:

- Compare literary components of various pre-twentieth-century American authors’ styles.
- Identifying examples of differences in language usage among several authors
Examples: Anne Bradstreet, Jonathan Edwards, Phillis Wheatley, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau (grade 10)

Although its treatment of American literature is a little sporadic, and included almost exclusively in grades 9-12, Alabama does much more than most states do to address this essential content at any level of detail.

Alabama’s research strand is generally thorough and thoughtful; it includes references to all aspects of the research process, including proper citation and documentation of sources. The standards for Oral and Visual Communication include important content for recognizing propaganda and persuasive strategies, which are included among the standards for reading informational text as well.

Finally, throughout the grades, the Alabama Writing and Language standards address specific content regarding grammar and usage. They also address writing outcomes by genres appropriate to grade levels, although the characteristics of the genres are not always described systematically or distinctly, as noted under “Clarity and Specificity,” above.

Content Weaknesses

The weaknesses in the Alabama standards are almost all attributable to problems with clarity and specificity, as discussed above, but a few instances of missing content or lack of prioritization also surface.

In grade 2, for example, where it is laudable that the construction of a paragraph is included as content, the standard is stuffed with writing process standards—yet omits the importance of using supporting sentences:

Organize sentences into a paragraph to address a topic or tell a story.

- Sorting information using graphic organizers
- Generating a topic sentence and a concluding sentence in a paragraph
- Drafting a written piece, including an introductory paragraph and a concluding paragraph
- Editing for spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and sentence variety
- Publishing final draft
- Using descriptive, narrative, and expository modes of writing
- Writing free verse poetry to express ideas (grade 2)

Such a standard also makes it hard to tell where Alabama’s priorities lie; many standards exhibit the same characteristic.

The Reading standards, for example, appear to place a heavy emphasis on metacognitive reading strategies. In grade 3, two voluminous sets of reading strategy standards are included under Reading, and much of the content and skills there seem heavy handed and repetitious as well. The standards writers appear not to have made tough choices about what to prioritize.

Overall, the content here is good, but some missing content and the lack of prioritization yield six points out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

The Bottom Line

Alabama’s standards addressing specific literary genres, elements, and devices are generally clearer and more detailed than those in the Common Core. In addition, the standards place a greater emphasis on the study of American literature throughout high school, whereas Common Core mentions it just once, in eleventh grade.

On the other hand, Common Core’s standards are generally clearer and more specific than those of Alabama. They also place no emphasis on unmeasurable reading comprehension strategies, which are unnecessarily prioritized among Alabama’s reading standards. In order to provide clearer and more explicit guidance about the quality and complexity of reading and writing that is expected of students, Common Core includes both sample student writing and a helpful list of exemplar texts. Such enhancements would significantly improve Alabama’s standards.

Alabama • Mathematics

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

Alabama Course of Study: Mathematics. July 2003.

Accessed from: <http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=54&sort=3&footer=sections>

Overview

Alabama’s 2003 standards are generally very strong. They are well presented and easy to read and understand. Their main drawback is their weak support for fundamental arithmetic skills. Note, however, the additional review, below, of Alabama’s 2009 math standards.²



Clarity and Specificity: 3/3

Content and Rigor: 5/7

Total State Score: 8/10

(Common Core Grade: A-)

General Organization

Alabama’s K-8 standards are organized by grade level and content strands such as “algebra” and “geometry.” Each grade is introduced with an overview, but these provide little illumination of the mathematics included. The grade-level standards do, however, frequently include bulleted lists that delineate more specific expectations within the standard.

The high school standards are unusually structured. They are organized by course, but the content strands (some of which are also course names) are used to subdivide the standards within the course. For example, the geometry course has a strand called geometry, but also strands for algebra and for data analysis. This structure makes for a disjointed presentation.

Clarity and Specificity

The K-8 standards are well organized and easy to read. There are not too many for each grade, and they are often succinctly stated. They generally give solid guidance about what students should know and be able to do, and some include helpful sample problems to clarify expectations.

As noted above, the high school courses are further divided by strand. This sometimes detracts from their clarity, both by artificially separating related content and by including extraneous content (explained below).

The standards are generally easy to understand and exceptionally clear and specific, despite the organizational flaws in high school. They earn three points out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Content and Rigor

Content Priorities

Though Alabama does not explicitly prioritize standards within the document, priorities are implicitly set by the number of them devoted to critical content. Using this as a guide, Alabama prioritizes content quite well. The standards are not excessive in number, and the elementary grades devote a near majority of the standards to the crucial development of arithmetic.

Content Strengths

High school content is generally well covered, including STEM-ready standards, such as:

Determining the maximum or minimum values of quadratic functions both graphically and algebraically (Algebra II)
 Determining the amplitude, period, phase shift, domain, and range of trigonometric functions and their inverses (Pre-Calculus)

As noted above, arithmetic is well prioritized and reasonably well covered. In particular, the standards include standards addressing place value for decimals, such as:

Determining the place value of a digit in a whole number through the hundred-thousands and in a decimal to the hundredths (grade 4)

The inclusion of place value is important but rare.

Finally, the state avoids some common pitfalls by requiring students to develop computational fluency without the use of technology.

Content Weaknesses

A few important shortcomings appear mainly in the area of arithmetic. Instant recall of number facts is missing, replaced with:

Demonstrating computational fluency for basic addition and subtraction facts with sums through 18 and difference with minuends through 18, using horizontal and vertical forms (grade 2)
 Demonstrating computational fluency in multiplication and division fact families through 12 (grade 4)

These are appropriate preliminary standards supporting the goal of mastery of number facts, but they are not sufficient. Students must know these facts with automaticity and not have to stop and compute them each time they see them.

The capstone standard for whole-number arithmetic is:

Demonstrating computational fluency with addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers (grade 5)

While this is a desirable standard, a rigorous treatment of it would include the standard algorithms, which are not mentioned at all in Alabama's standards. This omission could result in arbitrary computational techniques, and students without true mastery of whole-number manipulation are at a serious disadvantage as they move on to more difficult topics.

The development of fraction arithmetic is similarly lacking in specificity. While fluency with the arithmetic of fractions is a clearly stated goal, the standards do not offer a clear path to such mastery. The culminating standard for fraction arithmetic is:

Formulating algorithms using basic operations on fractions and decimals
 • Example: [D]etermin[e] a systematic set of steps that can be used to divide fractions (grade 6)

There is no further elaboration or example problems accompanying this standard and, as stated, the algorithms to be formulated are left to student discretion. This potentially leaves students with only their own methods to perform arithmetic rather than requiring them to master efficient and appropriate techniques.

In high school, algebra is generally well covered, including STEM material, though some of the foundational material for lines and quadratic equations is missing. The Geometry course is missing the basic vocabulary of axioms and proofs for Euclidean geometry and some of the standard statements and proofs of geometry are missing.

As noted earlier, the inclusion of strands within the high school courses results in some unfortunate standards. One such example is this standard in the data analysis and probability strand for the geometry course:

Analyze sets of data from geometric contexts to determine what, if any, relationships exist.
 • Example :Collect data and create a scatterplot comparing the perimeter and area of various rectangles. Determine whether a line of best fit can be drawn (Geometry)

This standard is extraneous in a geometry class, and the example asks a meaningless mathematical question; a line of best fit will always exist for a scatterplot, but defining “best fit” and producing the equation for a line of best fit is college-level mathematics.

Overall, Alabama’s standards cover much content well, despite some weakness in high school geometry. The chief problem is with the development of arithmetic. Given the overall simplicity and clarity of these standards, it is unfortunate that instant recall and the standard algorithms are not explicitly required. These “important shortcomings” (see *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A) result in a score of five points out of seven for Content and Rigor.

The Bottom Line

With some minor differences, Common Core and Alabama both cover the essential content for a rigorous, K-12 mathematics program. Alabama’s standards are briefly stated and usually clear, making them easier to read and follow than Common Core. In addition, the high school content is organized so that standards addressing specific topics, such as quadratic functions, are grouped together in a mathematically coherent way. The organization of the Common Core is more difficult to navigate, in part because standards dealing with related topics sometimes appear separately rather than together.

The chief weakness in Alabama’s standards stems from the lack of specific content expectations in the development of arithmetic. Common Core provides admirable focus and explicitly requires standard methods and procedures, enhancements that would benefit Alabama’s standards.

Alabama 2003 Standards and Updated 2009 Standards Comparison

Introduction

The Fordham team began to review math and ELA standards early in 2009. At the time, the 2003 Alabama standards, reviewed in detail above, were the most recently adopted—and official—documents. Since that time, however, Alabama has adopted new mathematics standards.

Seeking to provide state officials with as much information as possible as they weigh the important decision about whether or not to adopt the Common Core, our content experts have also reviewed the updated 2009 standards. Below is a summary of the differences between the 2003 and 2009 versions.

DOCUMENTS COMPARED

Alabama Course of Study: Mathematics. July 2003.

Accessed from: <http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=54&sort=3&footer=sections>

—COMPARED TO—

2009 Mathematics Course of Study Adopted Draft. 2009.

Accessed from: http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/doc_download.asp?section=54&id=12208&sort=21

Overview

The new Alabama mathematics standards include several improvements. Many standards have been revised to make them clearer and more readable. In some cases, the content itself has improved.

More importantly, the state has made significant changes in the development of arithmetic. Recall these expectations about basic number facts from the 2003 standards:

Demonstrating computational fluency for basic addition and subtraction facts with sums through 18 and difference with minuends through 18, using horizontal and vertical forms (grade 2)

Demonstrating computational fluency in multiplication and division fact families through 12 (grade 4)

The 2009 standards replace these with the much stronger:

Demonstrating computational fluency, including quick recall, of addition and subtraction facts with sums through 20 and differences with minuends through 20 (grade 2)

Demonstrate computational fluency, including quick recall, of multiplication facts through 12 x 12 and division facts with divisors and quotients through 12 (grade 3)

Although those standards are much improved, others appear inconsistent with them. In grade 4, they abandon recall and revert back to “computation strategies” with:

Demonstrating computational fluency in multiplication and division facts with products through 144 and quotients with dividends through 144 using horizontal and vertical forms

- Example: [U]tiliz[e] a variety of mental computation strategies to complete one hundred basic multiplication and division facts with 80 percent accuracy within a five-minute time limit (grade 4)

In addition, standard algorithms are still not required. While the introduction claims they are included in the standards, they are not.

The Bottom Line

The changes made in the updated 2009 Alabama math standards are a mixed bag. While some standards have improved, too many of the original content gaps remain. In addition, some of the changes have introduced inconsistencies that make the progression of content and rigor confusing and difficult to follow. Thus, our final grade of the Alabama standards has not changed.

-
- 1 In this 2010 review, Fordham reviewed the same standards document as we did in our previous evaluation, the *State of State Math Standards 2005*. However, the evaluation criteria that we used to judge the 2010 standards have been substantially revised and improved since 2005. (See Appendix C for a complete explanation of changes in criteria.) Through this new lens, Alabama’s math grade improved from a B in 2005 to a B-plus in 2010. The complete 2005 review can be found here: http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=338&pubsubid=1143#1143.
 - 2 On March 10, 2010—after Fordham had reviewed Alabama’s math standards—the state adopted its 2009 *Alabama Mathematics Course of Study*, replacing the 2003 version reviewed. To ensure reliability, and to better inform Alabama state officials, we provide a comparison of the 2003 standards to the 2009 version, also in this review.