

New York • English Language Arts

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Learning Standards for English Language Arts. March 1996.
Accessed from: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/pub/elalearn.pdf>

English Language Arts Core Curriculum. May 2005.
Accessed from: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/elacore.pdf>

Student Work. March 1996.
Accessed from: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/pub/elawork.pdf>

Overview

The presentation of the New York State Learning Standards for ELA—and the accompanying *English Language Arts Core Curriculum*—is somewhat confusing; and although much of the essential K-12 ELA content is included, it is often buried among non-essential standards more focused on instructional strategies than on student outcomes. In addition, many vaguely worded standards leave too much room for weak or inconsistent implementation across schools and districts.



Clarity and Specificity: 1/3
Content and Rigor: 3/7
Total State Score: 4/10
(Common Core Grade: B+)

General Organization

New York's ELA standards consist of two documents: the *Learning Standards for English Language Arts* and the *English Language Arts Core Curriculum*.

The former is divided into four standards common to all grades:

- » Information and understanding
- » Literary response and expression
- » Critical analysis and evaluation
- » Social interaction

Each of these standards is broken down into four strands (Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking). Each strand then describes expectations for three grade bands: elementary, intermediate, and commencement.

These learning standards are supplemented by the *English Language Arts Core Curriculum*, which is where one finds grade-specific performance indicators (what are typically thought of as “standards”). The *Core Curriculum* is divided into three categories:

- » “Core performance indicators,” which are common to all grades and which broadly describe what students should know and be able to do across all four standards
- » “Literacy competencies”
- » Grade-specific “performance indicators”

While the “literacy competencies” and “performance indicators” are presented separately, the difference between the two is not immediately clear.

Finally, the state provides “sample tasks” to accompany selected performance indicators, as well as a supplementary document containing examples of student work, “intended to begin articulating the performance standards for each level of achievement.”

Clarity and Specificity

The organization of the standards is somewhat muddled. It appears that the “learning standards” are broad descriptions of what students should know and be able to do across three different grade bands (elementary, intermediate, and commencement), yet the state does not clearly link these standards to the performance indicators found in the *Core Curriculum*.

The presentation of the latter document is equally confusing. The state breaks its expectations into “literary competencies” and “performance indicators,” but it’s difficult to understand what the intended difference between the two is; both include statements that describe what students should know and be able to do at each grade.

In addition, much of the language in both documents is too vague and generic to guide curriculum, instruction, or assessment development. Take, for example, the following performance indicators for the fifth-grade “critical analysis and evaluation” standard:

- Use strategies, such as note taking, semantic webbing, or mapping, to plan and organize writing (grade 5)
- Analyze the impact of an event or issue from personal and peer group perspectives...(grade 5)

While the inclusion of the supplementary document with student work samples and examples of student writing is admirable, the document itself feels unfinished and is somewhat difficult to navigate.

Such defects muddle the overall presentation, earning the standards two points out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Content and Rigor

Content Strengths

The standards include reasonably clear expectations for research papers. Students at the high school level are expected to use primary and secondary sources, select and limit their topics, use language appropriate to research, and accurately cite sources.

The expectations for K-8 grammar are similarly clear, although they could be strengthened by delineating a clearer progression from middle to high school.

The standards also devote ample attention to listening and speaking skills and to the analysis of media.

Many of the writing performance indicators are clear and outline important genre-specific expectations across grade levels. For example, these standards include:

Narrative:

- Develop literary texts that contain characters, simple plot and setting
- Use rhythm and rhyme to create short poems and songs (grade 4)

Informational/Expository Writing:

- Use at least two sources of information when writing a report.
- State a main idea and support it with facts and details.
- Use organizational patterns such as compare/contrast and time/order for expository writing.
- Compare and contrast ideas between two sources (grade 4)

Many Reading standards are similarly detailed, including:

- Use indexes to locate information and glossaries to define terms (grade 7)
- Identify the author’s point of view, such as first-person narrator and omniscient narrator (grade 7)
- Determine how the use and meaning of literary devices (e.g., symbolism, metaphor and simile, alliteration, personification, flashback and foreshadowing) convey the author’s message or intent (grade 7)

Content Weaknesses

The problem of vagueness noted above is exacerbated in the Reading standards by the omission of any authors or literary works across grades K-8. Take, for example, the following fourth-grade reading standard:

- Identify literary elements, such as setting, plot, and character, of different genres, with assistance (grade 4)

Such standards are meaningless unless the state makes it clear that students should be working with sufficiently rigorous and complex texts.

While the high school standards make some attempt to supply such guidance, the language of the performance indicators is too vague to ensure that students are reading consistently complex and rigorous texts across schools and districts. For example:

- Read a selection of poems of different forms, including sonnets, lyrics, elegies, narrative poems, and odes, and recognize the effect of the structure and form on the meaning (commencement)
- Act out scenes from a full-length play in class (commencement)
- Read and interpret works of recognized literary merit from several world cultures and recognize the distinguishing features of those cultural traditions (commencement)

The standards also make no mention of American literature. Instead, they merely emphasize reading a “wide range” of literature.

While important content (mentioned above) is included in the New York standards, much of it is hard to find because it’s buried among standards laced with unnecessary content or distracting detours into pedagogy. For example:

- Get to know the writer through friendly notes, cards, longer letters, and personal narratives read aloud to classmates and fellow listeners (grade 3)
- Share the process of writing with peers and adults; for example, write a condolence card, get-well card, or thank-you letter with writing partner(s) (grade 10)
- Share reading experiences to build relationships with peers or adults; for example, read together silently or aloud (grade 4)

Finally, the standards place disproportionate emphasis on “social interaction.” Not only does each standard implicitly address social interaction (“Students will read, write, listen, and speak for...”), but the fourth standard (“Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction”) is explicitly devoted to it.

Thus, despite a few areas of strength and the effort at comprehensiveness, the standards lack literary content, contain much vague language, leave excessive room for weak implementation, and include far too many standards focused on social interaction, pedagogy, or unnecessary content. Taken together, these shortcomings cause the omission of more than 35 percent of the critical K-12 ELA content, leaving New York with a score of four points out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

The Bottom Line

With their grade of C, New York’s ELA standards are mediocre. Those developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative earn a solid B-plus. The CCSS ELA standards are superior to what the Empire State has in place today.

New York • Mathematics

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Mathematics Core Curriculum MST Standard 3, PreKindergarten-12. Revised March 2005.
Accessed from: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/3-8/MathCore.pdf>

Overview

New York's standards are generally strong. They cover much of the essential content with both depth and rigor. The main weakness in the standards is with the development of arithmetic. Though it is reasonably prioritized, its coverage is not quite rigorous enough. High school content is often strong, including STEM-ready material.



Clarity and Specificity: 2/3
Content and Rigor: 5/7
Total State Score: 7/10
(Common Core Grade: A-)

General Organization

The Pre-K-12 standards are divided into five content strands, such as Number Sense and Operations and Algebra. (An additional five process strands are also provided.) Each strand is subdivided into topics, and then, for grades K-8, into grade-specific standards.

The high school standards follow a similar organizational structure, except the standards are presented by course rather than by grade.

Clarity and Specificity

The content standards are generally well presented and easy to read. However, these useful content standards are buried after a very long list of vague process standards, such as:

- Explore, examine, and make observations about a social problem or mathematical situation (grades K-4)
- Observe patterns and formulate generalizations (grades 7-8)
- Use mathematics to show and understand social phenomena (grades 1-8, all high school courses)

Worse, the state generally provides a greater number of process standards than content standards at each grade, thus burdening the standards with unnecessary and potentially distracting content.

Once past the vague process standards, the content standards are generally well presented and easy to read and understand. Most statements are succinct and detailed, for example:

- Skip count by 4's to 48 for multiplication readiness (grade 2)
- Measure objects, using ounces and pounds (grade 3)
- Know and understand equivalent standard units of length:
 - 12 inches = 1 foot
 - 3 feet = 1 yard (grade 4)

Some standards, however, are vague, such as:

- Formulate questions about themselves and their surroundings (grades 2-3)
- Understand the concept of rate (grade 6)

It is not clear what students are expected to know or what kinds of problems they should be able to solve.

The standards even go so far as to redefine words. For example, according to the state, the word “justify” can mean to find “a set of examples that supports the conjecture,” something that would not normally be considered a justification.

The high school standards are generally explicit, detailed, and rigorous. An example is this series on lines from the high school course in Integrated Algebra:

- Explain slope as a rate of change between dependent and independent variables
- Determine the slope of a line, given the coordinates of two points on the line
- Write the equation of a line, given its slope and the coordinates of a point on the line (Integrated Algebra)

While the plethora of process standards in each grade detracts from ease of reading, the content standards themselves are generally clear and well presented. Still, because some standards are too broadly stated to determine the intent, New York does not quite provide a “complete guide to users,” and therefore receives a Clarity and Specificity score of two points out of three. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Content and Rigor

Content Priorities

New York does not explicitly set priorities among its standards, though it does implicitly prioritize content through the number of standards devoted to particular topics. Admirably, New York prioritizes arithmetic reasonably well by devoting nearly half of the content standards in the crucial elementary grades to it.

Content Strengths

The structure of arithmetic—commutativity, associativity, distributivity, and the inverse nature of addition and subtraction and of multiplication and division—is well covered.

The number line is introduced early and continued throughout. Fractions are explicitly placed on the number line in this standard, which also makes explicit the connection of fractions to division:

- Develop an understanding of fractions as locations on number lines and as divisions of whole numbers (grade 4)

High school coverage is often excellent. Besides the examples above, the development of linear equations continues in Integrated Algebra with:

- Write the equation of a line, given the coordinates of two points on the line (Integrated Algebra)
- Write the equation of a line parallel to the x - or y -axis (Integrated Algebra)
- Determine the slope of a line, given its equation in any form (Integrated Algebra)

Quadratic equations are well covered and include the important technique of completing the square.

Geometry is extraordinary in its attention to detail and covers significant content quite well. In addition, most STEM-ready content is covered, including material on trigonometry and logarithms.

Content Weaknesses

The development of whole-number arithmetic is inadequate, in part because instant recall of the basic number facts is not explicitly required.

The continued development of whole-number arithmetic is missing both fluency and the standard algorithms, the crucial capstone standards for whole-number arithmetic. Instead, the standards specify “a variety of strategies” as in these for addition and subtraction:

- Use a variety of strategies to add and subtract 3-digit numbers (grade 3)
- Use a variety of strategies to add and subtract numbers up to 10,000 (grade 4)

There are similar standards for multiplication and division and all operations for decimals. Worse, when computations get more complicated, the standards explicitly state that a calculator should be used:

- Use a variety of strategies to multiply three-digit by three-digit numbers Note: Multiplication by anything greater than a three-digit multiplier/multiplicand should be done using technology (grade 5)

The development of fractions is missing common denominators.

One standard is at best misleading:

- Determine whether a given triangle is a right triangle by applying the Pythagorean Theorem and using a calculator (grade 7)

Calculators cannot make this determination, which requires the converse of the Pythagorean Theorem, not the theorem itself.

Although the geometry standards in high school are often excellent, there are some issues with proof and the foundations for geometry. The phrase “investigate, justify, and apply theorems” is used often. Proofs of major theorems are not specified, and axioms are included only in the introduction to the geometry course.

New York covers much of the essential content quite well, particularly in high school. In K-8, though arithmetic is reasonably prioritized, there are some weaknesses in its development. These few shortcomings result in a Content and Rigor score of five points out of seven. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

The Bottom Line

With their grade of B, New York’s mathematics standards are decent, while those developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative earn an impressive A-minus. The CCSS math standards are superior to what the Empire State has in place today.