

**Report of the English Language Arts Review Panel  
on the Common Core and Massachusetts Standards  
July 2010**

On June 8, 2010, the English Language Arts Review Panel met to discuss its assessment of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* and the *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework Working Draft June 2010*. This panel of teachers and administrators richly experienced in public, charter, and college or university education, comprises eight members: Lori DiGisi, Middle School Reading Teacher, Framingham Public Schools; Elise Frangos, Director of English, MassInsight for Research and Education, Massachusetts Math & Science Initiative; Lorretta Holloway, Associate Professor of English, Framingham State College; Joseph McCleary, Superintendent/ Director, Mystic Valley Regional Charter School; Barbara McLaughlin, Literacy/ ELA Senior Program Director, K-5, Boston Public Schools; Beverly Nelson, Assistant Superintendent, Medford Public Schools; Jane Rosenzweig, Director of Harvard College Writing Center, Harvard University; and George Viglirolo, English Teacher, Brookline High School (retired). Six of the panel members also participated in the framing, writing, or reviewing of Massachusetts ELA standards in 1996, 2001, 2004, or 2009.

The panel's collective assessment, which was based on each member's careful analysis of both sets of standards and supplementary material, as well as individual survey ratings, is summarized in the present report. While the panel found much to commend in both the Common Core document and the Massachusetts draft, the results of a straw poll of its members revealed a majority preference for the Common Core document: six votes cast for it; and two, for the Massachusetts draft.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, however, all of the votes for the Common Core were accompanied by recommendations or reservations, which are also included in this report.

The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* is unequivocal in its insistence upon academic rigor and high expectations for all students K-12. Some panel members questioned whether certain expectations are too high--for instance, Grade 3 Language Standard 1, which expects students to "demonstrate command" of subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement, comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives and adverbs, coordinating and subordinating

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<sup>1</sup> One of the two votes cast for the Massachusetts draft was subsequently changed, making seven votes in favor of the Common Core.

conjunctions, and compound and complex sentences. Other members wondered if some standards are high enough--as, for example, in the delaying of appropriately developed and organized writing until Grade 3. In either case, the descriptive, rather than prescriptive, presentation of goals and objectives in the Common Core document is seen as affording teachers flexibility in meeting those goals and objectives in ways that are most effective for them and their students. Moreover, in acknowledging its "intentional design limitations," the Common Core does not purport to address "all that can or should be taught," again allowing curriculum specialists and schools sufficient freedom to work within its guidelines (p. 6).

Among other salient features of the Common Core cited by various panel members were the introduction (pp. 3-8); applications of standards for English language learners and students with disabilities; foundational skills, K-5; language standards, grades 6-8; measurements of text complexity, K-12; emphasis on argumentative writing in both English language arts and other disciplines; the alignment of writing standards with the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework; literacy standards for other content areas in addition to English language arts; and appendices with valuable information on research, illustrative texts, and samples of student writing. The annotated compositions of Appendix C, however, should be expanded to include more representative examples of excellent argumentative, narrative, and creative writing, as well as samples of PreK efforts. Thus, it would then provide a richer sense of student voice and a broader range of varied, high quality student essays.

Not unlike the Common Core, the *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework Working Draft June 2010* strongly argues for high-quality, challenging, and richly varied educational experiences for all students PreK-12. Its ten Guiding Principles underscore both a commitment to excellence and an appreciation for diversity, recognizing, for instance, the importance of the literary heritage of the English-speaking world (Appendix A), as well as the traditions, past and present, of other cultures--in the exploration of all of the literary genres (Appendix B). The balance that the Massachusetts draft endeavors to strike between meeting common academic standards and attaining independence in learning is evident throughout--from the foundations of Language Study, especially phonemic and phonological awareness, to the cumulative skills of Research and Writing, including digital and print resources. While some panel members found the separate sections on analytical, persuasive, and expressive writing helpful, others thought that such divisions set up artificial distinctions among the often similar or composite forms that discourse can take, echoing the recognition in the Common Core that "...writers many times use a blend of...text types to accomplish their purposes" (p. 27, Appendix A).

The ELA panel members were unanimous, however, in viewing the PreK component as one of the critically important features of the Massachusetts draft, particularly in its range of student learning experiences--from early exposure to print concepts, phonics, and word recognition to creative participation in discussion, group work, and storytelling. In effect, the absence of PreK from the Common Core constitutes a serious omission in that set of standards. The immediate and far-reaching educational benefits of PreK--for the individual learner, for school reform, and for society as a whole--are thoroughly researched and well established. The panel, therefore, recommends the addition of PreK to the Common Core standards if that document is adopted.

Another feature of the Massachusetts draft worth emulating is its clarity in delineating the progression of standards from grade to grade, giving a clear sense of what students are expected to do at virtually every level. By contrast, distinctions between grade-level expectations in the Common Core standards are sometimes muted and, thus, not readily distinguishable.<sup>2</sup> At other times, the distinctions are nonexistent.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, some panel members felt that the utility of the Common Core document would be appreciably enhanced by the inclusion of differentiated grade alignments not unlike those found in the Massachusetts draft. Classroom teachers would then be better able to gauge differences in expectation of student performance between fourth and fifth grade, for instance, or between ninth and eleventh, and so forth.

The writing standards of both the Massachusetts draft and the Common Core document posit increasing emphasis upon the expository mode in general,

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<sup>2</sup>Grade 3: Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories. Grade 4: Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources. Grade 5: Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work, and provide a list of sources (p. 21). For examples at different grade levels and/ or in other standards, see p. 14 (RI.2), p. 24 (SL.1, 4), p. 36 (RL.1, 2), p. 39 (RI.1), p. 43 (W.6), p.46 (W.6,8).

<sup>3</sup> Grades 9-10: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest. Grades 11-12: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest (p. 50). Additional examples: p. 17 (RF.4), p. 46 (W.7), p. 53 (L.6).

and forms of argument in particular. This emphasis on argumentative writing struck many members of our panel as more precise and rigorous in the Common Core standards, hence more in line with the demands of writing in high school, college, or career. Whether crafting responses to literary texts, analyzing primary or secondary sources, explaining discipline-specific processes, evaluating public opinion on a local issue, or reporting their findings from research, students need to know how to defend their claims with details, examples, or other forms of evidence organized in clearly expressed, focused, and coherent discourse. The Common Core standards further highlight the necessity for "planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach" in producing drafts under a tight deadline or over an extended time frame. Additionally, the strategic use of technology in "creating, refining, and collaborating on writing" is designed to foster the judicious use and critical evaluation of multiple print and digital sources (pp. 41, 63).

The increasing emphasis upon argumentative writing would seem to parallel a comparable emphasis upon the reading of informational texts, particularly in grades 6-12. Again, several panel members thought that emphasis more pronounced in the Common Core document than in the Massachusetts draft. Although the latter was cited as giving more attention to "literary exposure," both documents raise questions about whether or not the predominant focus on British and American texts gives short shrift to European or world literatures. It should be pointed out, however, that neither the Massachusetts draft, with its supplementary listings of authors and titles, nor the Common Core, with its appendix of illustrative texts, claims to provide a complete reading list, intending, rather, to offer text samples as a guide to selecting works of comparable complexity and quality. The Common Core enunciates this position in its introduction to Appendix B, as well as in its "Note on range and content of student reading," which asserts that "students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of literary and informational texts" and across "diverse cultures" (pp. 10, 35, 38).

Moreover, the Common Core recognizes that an increase in informational reading requires disciplines other than English language arts to assume a substantial portion of that responsibility, especially in the higher grades (p.5). Such sharing of tasks is a good thing. It is, in fact, essential--not only for maintaining and affirming the pivotal role that the teaching of poetry, drama, short story, novel, and literary non-fiction plays in the English language arts classroom, but also for reinforcing the teaching of reading and writing across disciplines. In this latter regard, the inclusion of "Literacy in History/ Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects" in the Common Core is viewed as a positive step in the direction of interdisciplinary cooperation. Indeed, one might

well add mathematics to the literacy supplement, if it is not already integrated in the standards for that subject.

In the discussion of each set of standards and in the review of comments on the ELA survey, three particular issues or concerns were raised. One panel member challenged a fundamental assumption of the Common Core document--namely, that readying students for college is tantamount to readying students for career. This "implied equivalency," according to that member, has "no consensus among teachers and experts" and diminishes the usefulness of the Common Core document "as a national standard." The majority, on the other hand, took the view that the skills outlined in the Common Core would prepare students for success in either pursuit and, equally important, enable them to adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing world. On a different topic, another panel member observed that insofar as the Common Core document supports systematic review of its contents (see, for example, its self-characterization as a "living work" to be revised "as new and better evidence emerges," p. 3) and since research in such fields as literacy, for example, is continuous, the need to provide ample time and resources for the professional development of teachers and administrators should not be overlooked. Similarly, while the Common Core recognizes that special provision "beyond the scope of the Standards" must be made for advanced students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, it must also take into account those other students outside of these categories who will struggle to gain mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed at each grade level. They, too, will require special support to become college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language if they are to have equal opportunity for inclusion in that impressive "portrait of students who meet the standards" (pp. 6-7).

Finally, in an extended conference call on June 15, the English language Arts Review Panel recapitulated its preference for the ***Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects***, commending in particular the following components:

- the writing standards, with an argument focus applicable to both literary and non-literary analysis;
- the inclusion of "Literacy in History/ Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects," lending credence to the importance of cross-disciplinary collaboration and the shared responsibility for the development of students' literacy skills;
- speaking and listening standards, through which students extend vocabulary acquisition, as well as learn from one another in collaborative discussion;

- language standards that call upon the early, habitual use of glossaries, dictionaries, thesauruses, and specialized reference materials;
- the strategic combining of multiple print and digital sources in gathering information for research and the production and distribution of writing;
- the informative discussion of text complexity, along with models for measuring it, in Appendix A;
- the samples of student work and accompanying annotations in Appendix C;
- the guidance that the document offers to classroom teachers and school administrators in meeting goals and objectives;
- and its thoroughgoing focus on academic rigor in all of the standards.

In sum, the general tenor of the Common Core document bespeaks an abiding belief in high academic achievement through the pursuit of the best possible educational praxis. Its ultimate aim is not only to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind necessary for success in college and career, but also to prepare them to become engaged citizens capable of dealing with change and the unpredictable challenges of life in the twenty-first century.

Respectfully submitted,  
George Viglirolo  
July 2010

#### **The English Language Arts Review Panel**

Lori DiGisi	Middle School Reading Teacher, Framingham Public Schools
Elise Frangos	Director of English, MassInsight for Research and Education, Massachusetts Math & Science Initiative, Boston
Lorretta Holloway	Associate Professor of English, Framingham State College
Joseph McCleary	Superintendent/ Director, Mystic Valley Regional Charter School, Malden
Barbara McLaughlin	Literacy/ ELA Senior Program Director, K-5, Boston Public Schools
Beverly Nelson	Assistant Superintendent, Medford Public Schools
Jane Rosenzweig	Director of Harvard College Writing Center, Harvard University, Cambridge
George Viglirolo	English Teacher, Brookline High School (retired)

July 2, 2010

*English Language Arts Review Panel:*

*Proposed Common Core Standards vs. Massachusetts 2010 ELA Standards / **Minority Report***

Dear George:

I want to thank you and the rest of the panelists for the lively exchange of views on the relative merits of the proposed Common Core and the 2010 Massachusetts Standards. After reviewing the notes of our discussions and conference calls, I feel I owe you, the panel and the board an explanation of my decision. I have briefly summarized my judgments of the standards.

**I do not recommend** the adoption of the Common Core Standards, but emphatically **do recommend** the use of the complete 2010 Massachusetts Standards. Below I give some of my reasons for this judgment.

1. **Coherence and Clarity:** The Massachusetts Standards are much more succinct and clearly organized, both horizontally and vertically.
2. **Literary emphasis:** The Massachusetts Standards maintain a vital emphasis on literary study which is essential to success in college and to the formation of an educated citizenry. Having taught university classes in both rhetoric and literature as well as high school and elementary school English, I can personally attest to this. This essential literary emphasis is seriously diluted in the Common Core.
3. **Confusion of Career and College Readiness:** The Common Core places the equivalency of College and Career Readiness at the center of the standards whereas the Massachusetts Standards do not. There are serious questions regarding the validity of this equivalency that are not treated adequately in the Common Core.
4. **Lack of guiding principles:** The Common Core is seriously inferior to the Massachusetts Standards in its failure to enunciate a clear set of guiding principles, whereas the Massachusetts Standards present Ten Guiding Principles that provide essential guidance to teachers.
5. **Unequal Appendices:** The Common Core appendices, while including some noteworthy content, are notably lacking in the level of organization and articulation that characterize the Massachusetts appendices and are thereby rendered much less useful to teachers.

In light of the enormous progress made by our state's students under the guidance of the Massachusetts Standards, it would be most unfortunate to replace them with standards that fail to compare favorably in so many areas.

Sincerely,

Joseph R. McCleary, Ph.D.