New Critiques Urge Changes in Common Standards

By Catherine Gewertz

A draft of grade-by-grade common standards is undergoing significant revisions in response to feedback that the outline of what students should master is confusing and insufficiently user-friendly.

Writing groups convened by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association are at work on what they say will be a leaner, better-organized, and easier-to-understand version than the 200-plus-page set that has been circulating among governors, scholars, education groups, teams of state education officials, and others for review in recent weeks. The first public draft of the standards, which was originally intended for a December release but was postponed until January, is now expected by mid-February.

“Teachers, experts, and states have all said to us, ‘Please pay attention to design so that it’s clear to the end-user what the standards are.’ So we’re trying to both get the standards right and prepare a document that teachers around the country are going to find useful,” said Dane Linn, the director of the education division of the NGA’s Center for Best Practices.

“What we need to end up with is a document that adheres to our criteria of ‘fewer, clearer, higher,’ and a document in which teachers clearly see what the standards are.”

The draft—actually three documents—under revision describes the skills and knowledge students need in each grade from kindergarten through high school. One of the documents focuses on English/language arts, another on mathematics, and a third on the literacy skills students in middle and high school need to apply to the study of history and science.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative, led by the CCSSO and the NGA, aims to establish high expectations for all students. Forty-eight states have signed on to support the standards effort.

A set of “college and career-ready” standards, describing the proficiencies needed by the end of high school for good jobs or higher education, was released last fall after expert input, revised after it garnered more than 1,100 public comments on the CCSSO’s Web site, and is still undergoing revision.

Once state and expert feedback has been gathered and fully incorporated into the K-12 draft, it is to be posted for public comment as well, before undergoing further changes.

Draft copies of the K-12 standards, obtained by Education Week, and interviews with some of those who gave and received feedback, provide a glimpse into the notoriously difficult process of distilling vast landscapes of content and skill into useful forms that satisfy audiences with differing needs and views.

Aware that disclosure of early drafts could stoke controversy, Mr. Linn and others guiding the effort emphasized that each successive draft is a work in progress, and they cautioned against drawing fixed conclusions at this point.

A mid-January draft of the K-8 math standards is organized around “progressions” that span several grade levels, such as fractions, geometry, or probability, and lists core concepts and skills needed for each grade level in a particular topical area.
The high school math section organizes the standards not by grade level, but by areas outlined in the college and career-ready standards, such as expressions, coordinates, and statistics. Each has lists of mathematical practices and topics, which in turn cite core concepts and skills.

An English draft from mid-January describes the strengths students need at each grade level in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language development or use, including observing craft and structure, conducting research, and understanding the nuance of words. Those strengths are applied to different types of texts, including narrative, informational, drama, and poetry.

What students should know and be able to do in each of those areas of English is divided into “standards” and “core standards.” Examples of texts, and descriptions of how to determine grade-level-appropriate complexity, are included.

Rounds of written feedback, conference calls, and face-to-face meetings on the draft standards identified a number of things that needed changing.

Of the participants in the feedback and revision process who were interviewed for this story, most requested anonymity because they were charged with working in confidence. They said the largest chunk of the current revamping involves making the English standards easier to understand. Many reviewers faulted the draft for not making it clear which elements were the standards themselves and which were other ideas or principles.

“There were some things that were impossible to make out in there,” one reviewer said.

Mary Jane Tappen, Florida’s deputy chancellor for curriculum and instruction, who led a state team reviewing the standards, said that overall, her team was “very pleased” with both the draft English and math standards. But the group thought that the language in the math draft should be clearer, and that the English document should be “condensed so it’s more user-friendly for the teacher.”

The English standards would be easier for teachers in a more streamlined version, said Jeffrey M. Nellhaus, the deputy commissioner of education in Massachusetts. “The structure of the [English] standards is very hard to explain to anyone,” he said.

The K-8 math standards are “pretty strong right now,” Mr. Nellhaus said, but the high school math portion needs refining. He said he is not convinced that organizing that section by topical area is the best way to present high school math standards.

“How are those going to be organized by course or [by] integrated grade-level courses?” he asked.

Massachusetts supports the idea of common standards and believes the drafts are “on the right path,” Mr. Nellhaus said. But the current drafts “need to undergo some fairly substantial improvement,” he said, “before we are going to feel comfortable with them.”

Another reviewer said the English standards should parse the different skills students need when reading the same type of text for varying purposes. For instance, he said, reading a novel for literary criticism requires different skills from reading it for pleasure.

That reviewer and others noted that grade-to-grade sequencing needed refinement in some places as well, such as asking students to “compare” two texts at one grade level and “contrast” them at another.

A source at the American Federation of Teachers said the union would like to see more clarity of language and grade-by-grade specificity, “so a teacher could pick it up and teach to it.” The group also spotted grade-sequencing problems in some places, the source said,
such as requiring a math skill in one grade level without prerequisite skills in the previous grade level.

**Progress Seen**

A number of those who have reviewed successive drafts see improvements.

James D. Marshall, who helped the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association develop standards in the 1990s and has worked with several states to craft theirs, said he was concerned that a December draft of the English standards didn’t offer a complete enough description of how to assess a text’s complexity. That concern was resolved when he saw a January draft, which did a much better job, said Mr. Marshall, the associate dean for academic programs at the University of Georgia’s college of education.

“They’ve made some very good progress,” he said.

Another reviewer said newer drafts do a much better job than previous ones of detailing the differing skills students need to read in various disciplines.

One area of revision in the math standards is making sure that each grade’s skills build properly on the previous grade’s, Mr. Linn of the NGA said.

Another, according to one reviewer, was grappling with whether the math draft is “overly ambitious” in what—and how much—it asks of students at some levels. Both that source and another working on the English draft said the writing groups are figuring out whether to move certain skills up a grade level or two.

A math professor who reviewed the draft as part of a panel discussion said that its “clarity and flow” needed improvement, that skills and concepts needed better matching, and grade-to-grade progression needed smoothing. Also, he said, the document needs to be a bit clearer for key audiences.

“The consequences of a good or bad draft are very big in terms of what teachers, textbook writers, and assessment people get out of them,” said Bert Fristedt, a University of Minnesota-Twin Cities professor who served on the National Mathematics Advisory Panel. “The draft needs to have better readability for those people.”

Several reviewers said writers and reviewers of the math draft were trying to work out possible differences between the skills that should be required of all students, and only of those aiming for college majors or careers in math or science.

Said one participant, “Let’s just say there’s a bit of a tension there.”

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