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FROM: Alissa Peltzman, Vice President of State Policy and Implementation Support, Achieve
DATE: March 1, 2016
SUBJECT: Achieve's Review of the final draft of the Louisiana Standards for English Language Arts

Executive Summary

The 2016 Draft Louisiana Standards for English Language Arts (referred to in this report as the draft 2016 ELA Standards) reflect the best available evidence of what students need to learn in order to be prepared for college and careers. Louisiana's Standards for English Language Arts substantially meet Achieve's criteria. There are two areas that deserve further attention by the writers: (1) To be well prepared for postsecondary success, high school graduates must be able to apply literacy skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – not only in ELA classrooms but also across academic disciplines as well as within career and technical courses; and (2) To ensure students are prepared for the rigors of post-secondary endeavors, Louisiana needs to provide educators clear guidance on what is regarded as appropriate grade-level complexity of texts from grades 2-12.

- 1. To ensure that the standards are aligned with the demands of postsecondary education and training, Louisiana should address the issue of literacy in all the content areas, not just in English language arts classrooms.***

The draft 2016 ELA Standards do indicate in grades 2-5 that students will read texts across content areas, in the Reading Informational Text standard 10. By grade 6, however, the mention of reading across content areas no longer appears:

LA.RI.6.10. By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

In elementary school, simply specifying that students will read texts from across content areas works because the elementary teacher teaches social studies, science, and the arts, etc., in addition to English. By middle school, delineating some specific expectations for content-area literacy and making clear that literacy instruction is not solely the domain of the English language arts teacher becomes important.¹

¹ Shanahan, T and C. Shanahan. (2008). *Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy*. Harvard Educational Review. Vol. 78. No.1. Spring 2008. <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/68122E6C-6783-46F4-80AD-505229C336C9/0/ShanahanArticle061909.pdf>

Reading and writing skills need to be addressed somewhat differently in the various content areas to reflect the demands of the discipline. Although the most salient characteristics remain the same, the final product of a research project in history, for example, differs quite a bit from a research project in chemistry. Developing literacy standards across the content areas is one step towards advancing the state's commitment to improving literacy across-the-board.

The CCSS offers an entirely separate set of standards, "Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects," for grades 6-12 in order for students to become truly competent readers, writers, and thinkers. (In grades K-5, the reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language standards apply to all content areas.) If Louisiana is planning to extend clear expectations in literacy beyond the English language arts classroom, the state should consider addressing how and when it plans to do this in the introduction to the ELA standards. That way, educators will know this is not an oversight.

2. Louisiana needs to offer clear guidance on what is regarded as appropriate grade-level complexity of texts. The standards identify grades 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-10 and 11-12 text complexity bands. Further definition of those bands is needed.

In its 2006 report *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*², ACT demonstrates that "the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to comprehend complex texts." The draft 2016 ELA Standards present a stipulation about the level of reading (literary and informational) expected at each grade level, beginning in grade 2:

LA.RL.2.9. By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories and poetry, in the grades 2-3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

LA.RI.2.10. By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 2–3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

There is no guidance offered to educators and students regarding selecting works of appropriate complexity; there is no definition of the quantitative levels of the grade bands that are referenced in the standards. Without definition, this approach could easily result in educators retaining the same texts they are teaching now at their grade levels without actually knowing if they are in fact grade-appropriate in terms of complexity.

Reading standards can define grade-level texts in a variety of ways. One way is to offer a reading list. For example, the American Diploma Project (ADP) Benchmarks suggested that the benchmarks should be

² ACT. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/reading_report.pdf

used in close coordination with reading lists developed by two ADP Network partner states, Indiana and Massachusetts. Another option is to offer judicious use of examples within the standards themselves. Another is to describe and offer tools for teachers to measure text complexity. The CCSS describe a variety of quantitative levels and qualitative factors that define text complexity in *Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards*.³ As noted above, since the Louisiana standards call for students to read at certain text complexity bands at each grade level beginning in grade 2, one way to consider filling this gap would be to adopt the quantitative levels set out in the *Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity*.⁴

Review of the Draft Louisiana Standards for English Language Arts for 2016-2017 Using Achieve’s Criteria for the Evaluation of College-and Career-Ready Standards

The purpose of Achieve’s standards review of the February 2016 draft of the Louisiana Standards for English Language Arts is to determine whether they are high-quality standards that prepare students, over the course of their K–12 education careers, for success in credit-bearing college courses and quality, high-growth jobs. When evaluating standards, Achieve has historically used six criteria: rigor, focus, coherence, specificity, clarity/accessibility, and measurability. For purposes of this analysis, the draft 2016 ELA Standards was analyzed with respect to these criteria.

Rigor

Rigor is the quintessential hallmark of exemplary standards. It is the measure of how closely a set of standards represents the content and cognitive demand necessary for students to succeed in credit-bearing college courses without remediation and in entry-level, quality high-growth jobs. It appears that Louisiana has been exacting in its examination of the level of demand in its draft 2016 ELA Standards, drawing on the best of the college- and career-readiness standards and research. The new draft Louisiana standards draw upon the best of its current standards, which are the CCSS.

The following are the results of analyzing Louisiana’s new standards against these measures:

³ Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf

⁴ National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA), Council of Chief State School Officers. n.d. *Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity*. Washington, DC: Author. Accessed October 28, 2015
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/E0813_Appendix_A_New_Research_on_Text_Complexity.pdf.

The Louisiana standards require that students read within an identified text complexity band from grade 2 through grade 12. Louisiana will need to define those bands concretely in order for teachers to understand what level of texts qualify for each grade.

Research makes clear that the complexity levels of the texts students are presently required to read are significantly below what is required to achieve college- and career-readiness.⁵ Rather than focus solely on the skills of reading and writing, standards need to build a staircase of text complexity so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school. At each grade level, Louisiana’s standards refer to students reading text within an appropriate span of complexity. What qualifies as grades 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-12 bands of complexity, however, is not yet defined. In its final draft, Louisiana needs to provide guidance for educators regarding text complexity bands and define “on-level” complexity with specificity.

There are a number of different approaches the state could choose to address this need. Louisiana could define grade-level complexity using a reading list, example texts listed in the standards, and/or a quantitative rubric of some kind to guide educators and students in selecting works of appropriate complexity to meet the standards. Since Louisiana calls for students to read texts within certain grade bands, the most logical fix is to define the quantitative levels of each band. An easy fix would be to link to the CCSS guidelines for text complexity.

Louisiana dedicates several standards to vocabulary, both in the reading and language standards. These include a focus on acquisition of academic vocabulary, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning.

Closely related to text complexity—and inextricably connected to reading comprehension by nearly a century of research—is the need to focus on building students’ academic vocabulary (words that appear in texts in a variety of content areas). Louisiana includes numerous standards on vocabulary in grades K-12, signaling its importance. These expectations address the connotation and denotation of words, along with the impact of word choices on meaning and tone, roots and affixes, word relationships, the meaning of words in context, and knowledge of academic vocabulary. A small matter but one that Louisiana will want to attend to is the fact that in all grades except grade 5, acquiring and using accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific vocabulary, exists as Standard 6 in the Language Standards. In grade 5, however, that concept appears in Standard 5 as “d.” That could prove confusing to users of the standards.

The Louisiana standards place emphasis on reading content-rich informational text and include clear requirements around conducting research.

⁵ACT, Inc. (2006). Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading. Iowa City, IA: Author.

Most of the required reading in college and workforce training programs is informational in structure and challenging in content. Part of the motivation for supporting the interdisciplinary approach to literacy is the extensive research establishing the need for college- and career-ready students to be proficient in reading and learning from complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. Fulfilling this mandate requires that ELA teachers also place greater attention on a specific category of informational text—literary nonfiction—that has been traditionally neglected in many classrooms. The elementary years are key for students to grow their knowledge about the world. Research shows that the connection between informational text, content knowledge, and reading comprehension is crucial. The dominance of narrative and fictional text in the elementary curriculum has lessened the growth of knowledge necessary to building students’ reading comprehension skills.⁶

Louisiana divides the reading standards into two sections: Literature and Informational Text. This clearly communicates the expectation that, in addition to reading and studying literature, students should read and study informational texts. The standards are thoughtful about which skills and abilities in reading are genre-specific and which hold true across genres in order to purposefully get at how successful readers approach these different types of texts.

Louisiana also dedicates several standards to research, indicating its importance to the field. The standards ask students to develop questions, find information about a specific topic, evaluate sources for relevancy, integrate findings, and cite sources appropriately. These are important elements in an effective research process and product. Importantly, the standards focus on short (as well as sustained) research projects. Requiring several short research projects enables students to repeat the research process many times in a year so they are able to develop the expertise needed to conduct research independently. A progression of shorter research projects also encourages students to develop expertise in one area by confronting and analyzing different aspects of the same topic. An ongoing focus on research across the year also reinforces attention to writing to sources, which is evident in benchmark college-and career-ready standards, including the CCSS.

The Louisiana standards provide solid grounding in drawing evidence from texts.

Surveys of employers and college faculty cite the ability to extract details from texts and draw accurate conclusions in writing using evidence as key to success in college and the workplace.⁷ As the ability to find and use evidence to support claims is a hallmark of strong readers and writers, college- and career-ready standards need to call on students to answer text-dependent questions that demonstrate their ability to closely read a text. This measure places a premium on students not only explicitly finding what is stated, but also making valid claims that square with the evidence when writing to sources.

⁶ Neuman, S. B. (2006). How we neglect knowledge—and why. *American Educator*, 30(1), 24.

⁷ 2009 ACT National Curriculum Survey; Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, 2002; and Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts. American Diploma Project, 2004.

Louisiana identifies relevant textual evidence while reading throughout the grades (sometimes in the earlier grades referred to as key details in text to draw logical inferences and to back up and justify their answers). The “evidence” standards progress in rigor and challenge throughout the grades, which is a strength of the reading standards.

The Louisiana writing standards also call for use of evidence when writing. Students are asked to develop an informational essay or an opinion or argument with reasons that are supported by facts, details, and other evidence. This is supplemented with writing standards in grades 4-12 that call specifically for students to draw evidence from texts to support their analyses, reflections, and research.

In its final draft, Louisiana may want to define how much of students’ high school writing should be expository, argumentative, and narrative. Too often, students graduate with too little experience writing expository texts and arguments.

Focus

High-quality standards establish priorities about the concepts and skills that students should acquire by graduation from high school. Choices should be based on the knowledge and skills essential for students to succeed in postsecondary education and the world of work. A sharpened focus also helps ensure that the cumulative knowledge and skills students are expected to learn—and teachers are expected to teach—is manageable.

The following is the result of analyzing Louisiana standards against this criterion:

Louisiana’s draft standards reflect a commitment to priorities in the college- and career-ready research.

Issues that pertain to building vocabulary, drawing evidence from texts and research, and building knowledge are evident in all four major domains of the standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. Requirements for students to read texts of appropriate complexity also figure prominently in the standards.

Coherence

The way in which a state’s college- and career-ready standards are categorized and broken out into supporting domains should reflect a coherent structure of the discipline and reveal significant relationships among the strands and how the study of one complements the study of another. If college- and career-ready standards suggest a progression, that progression should be meaningful and appropriate across the grades or grade spans.

The following are the results of analyzing Louisiana’s standards against this criterion:

The 2016 ELA Standards reflect a meaningful structure for the discipline.

The 2016 ELA Standards present a broad vision of the ELA curriculum that includes important knowledge and skills, not only in such traditional areas of language, writing, and literature, but also in the areas of informational reading and media, which have been traditionally underrepresented in the ELA curriculum.

The structure of the ELA discipline historically has been represented in varying ways by standards documents. The 2016 ELA Standards arrange the content into six strands: 1) Reading Literature, 2) Reading Informational Text, 3) Reading Foundations (Grades K-5 only), 4) Writing, 5) Speaking and Listening, and 6) Language. The different strands are meant to function as interdependent units that form a coherent whole when translating them into units of instruction. It is helpful in a set of standards to reveal significant relationships among the strands, suggesting how the study of one complements the study of another. This is done in some limited fashion within the Louisiana standards. For example, the language standards are to be exhibited in students' reading and writing and the writing and research standards require that students draw evidence from what they read. Louisiana could go further by referring to the Language Standards in the writing and speaking standards. Connections could also be drawn between the vocabulary standards that appear in both the Reading and Language domains.

The Louisiana standards do an outstanding job of defining meaningful progressions of expectations throughout the grade levels.

Progression is always a fundamental challenge in ELA standards. Students use many of the same reading and writing skills and strategies across all grade levels (such as identifying main idea and supporting details, identifying theme, writing topic sentences and focused paragraphs, etc.), but educators expect increasing sophistication and flexibility in the use and application of these skills and strategies to read increasingly challenging texts.

Not a lot of research is available to describe the ideal sequence or progression of how students should be taught and gain individual skills in ELA/literacy. There is, however, substantial research about the importance of reading tasks growing in rigor as students advance through school in order to meet the increasing reading demands students will face in college and on the job.⁸

There are many examples of the Louisiana standards progressing in every domain. Reading standards, for example, progress from identifying the reasons an author gives to support points he or she makes, to

⁸ Perfetti, C. A., Landi, N., & Oakhill, J. (2005). *The acquisition of reading comprehension skill*. In M.J. Snowling & C. Hulme (Eds.), *The science of reading: A handbook*. (pp. 227-247); National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel. *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Retrieved 10.20.2015, from <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm>; Cain, K. (2009). Making sense of text: Skills that support text comprehension and its development. *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 35, 11-14.

describing how reasons the author provides supports specific points, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence sufficient for arguments an author puts forward, to applying these evaluation skills to the arguments and reasoning in seminal U.S texts. Likewise, writing standards progress from using a combination of drawing and dictating to composing opinion pieces, writing opinion pieces supported with reasons and information to writing arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant and sufficient evidence. These patterns of progressions reflect the demands of rigorous college-and career-ready standards.

Specificity

Quality standards are precise and provide sufficient detail to convey the level of performance expected without being overly prescriptive. Standards that maintain a relatively consistent level of precision (“grain size”) are easier to understand and use. Those that are overly broad or vague leave too much open to interpretation, increasing the likelihood that students will be held to different levels of performance, while atomistic standards encourage a checklist approach to teaching and learning that undermines students’ overall understanding of the discipline. The Louisiana standards strike the right balance, adding important clarifications in parentheses when appropriate.

Clarity/Accessibility

Standards should be written in clear, non-jargon laden prose, thereby communicating in language that can gain widespread acceptance not only by postsecondary faculty but also by employers, teachers, parents, school boards, legislators and others who have a stake in schooling.

The following are the results of analyzing Louisiana standards against this criterion:

The format of the 2016 ELA Standards does not make it easy to recognize the progression of skills from grade to grade or the parallel expectations set for each skill.

At present the standards are presented for each grade level. Importantly, that allows teachers to have in one place all of the expectations for the grade to which they are assigned. Moving forward, it would be helpful to the field to offer—in addition to the grade-by-grade format of the standards—a format that would show the progression of demand and complexity grade to grade. Doing so will allow teachers to see at a glance what their students should have learned in the previous grade and what they are preparing students to learn in subsequent grades.

The standards should also include a user-friendly and consistent numbering system to allow users of the document to connect each statement with a unique number, for the purposes of quick referencing and showing linkages between grade levels. Currently statements are numbered sequentially but are not given a unique identifier that includes the grade level and the strand. This will help when showing

alignment of standards to statewide and local curriculum and assessments.

Another issue with numbering in the current Louisiana draft is that, in the Reading Literature strand, standards are numbered 1-9 while in the Reading Informational Text strand, standards are numbered 1-10. There is no argument standard in reading literature, so rather than leave that standard blank (as is done with Standard 8 in the CCSS), Louisiana has chosen to make its comparing multiple texts and text complexity standards, standards 8 and 9 rather than standards 9 and 10. The result is that when comparing informational text and literature standards, the two strands do not share the same numbering. A footnote to draw teacher's attention to this could prove helpful in the final draft as they work to implement the standards. Alternatively, the state may want to consider revising to use the CCSS system so that when educators refer to reading standard 10, for example, this is always the standard on wide reading at the appropriate text complexity level.

The Louisiana standards include many parentheticals to provide concrete examples of what the standards mean and to make the expectations clearer to all audiences.

The information included in the parentheticals ranges from providing examples of the types of texts that might apply, to a specific application of the standard, or further explanation or definition of the terms used in the standards. They are present in all of Louisiana's ELA strands. Following are some examples from various strands of the high school standards.

LA.RL.11-12.5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

LA.RL.11-12.6. Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

LA.RI.9-10.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

LA.RI.9-10.7. Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

LA.RI.9-10.9. Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.

LA.RI.11-12.8. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the

application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., The Federalist, presidential addresses).

LA.W.11-12.10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

LA.SL.11-12.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

LA.L.11-12.4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

- a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
- b. Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., conceive, conception, conceivable).
- c. Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, its etymology, or its standard usage.
- d. Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).

Measurability

In general, standards should focus on the results, rather than the processes of teaching and learning. The draft 2016 ELA Standards does just that: they present clearly measurable student outcomes that focus on results rather than the processes of teaching and learning. The standards also make use of performance verbs that call for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills (such as *delineate*, *identify*, *write*, and *cite*), rather than those that refer to learning activities (such as *examine* and *explore*) or cognitive processes (such as *know* or *appreciate*).



**Appendix: The Criteria Used for the Evaluation of
College- and Career-Ready Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics**

Criteria	Description
Rigor: What is the intellectual demand of the standards?	Rigor is the quintessential hallmark of exemplary standards. It is the measure of how closely a set of standards represents the content and cognitive demand necessary for students to succeed in credit-bearing college courses without remediation and in entry-level, quality, high-growth jobs. For Achieve’s purposes, the Common Core State Standards represent the appropriate threshold of rigor.
Coherence: Do the standards convey a unified vision of the discipline, do they establish connections among the major areas of study, and do they show a meaningful progression of content across the grades?	The way in which a state’s college- and career-ready standards are categorized and broken out into supporting strands should reflect a coherent structure of the discipline and/or reveal significant relationships among the strands and how the study of one complements the study of another. If college- and career-ready standards suggest a progression, that progression should be meaningful and appropriate across the grades or grade spans.
Focus: Have choices been made about what is most important for students to learn, and is the amount of content manageable?	High-quality standards establish priorities about the concepts and skills that should be acquired by graduation from high school. Choices should be based on the knowledge and skills essential for students to succeed in postsecondary education and the world of work. For example, in mathematics, choices should exhibit an appropriate balance of conceptual understanding, procedural knowledge and problem solving skills, with an emphasis on application. In English language arts, standards should reflect an appropriate balance between literature and other important areas, such as informational text, oral communication, logic, and research. A sharpened focus also helps ensure that the cumulative knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn is manageable.
Specificity: Are the standards specific enough to convey the level of performance expected of students?	Quality standards are precise and provide sufficient detail to convey the level of performance expected without being overly prescriptive. Standards that maintain a relatively consistent level of precision (“grain size”) are easier to understand and use. Those that are overly broad or vague leave too much open to interpretation, increasing the likelihood that students will be held to different levels of performance, while atomistic standards encourage a checklist approach to teaching and learning that undermines students’ overall understanding of the discipline. Also, standards that contain multiple expectations may be hard to translate into specific performances.
Clarity/Accessibility: Are the standards clearly written and presented in an error-free, legible, easy-to-use format that is accessible to the general public?	Clarity requires more than just plain and jargon-free prose that is also free of errors. College- and career-ready standards also must be communicated in language that can gain widespread acceptance not only from postsecondary faculty but also from employers, teachers, parents, school boards, legislators, and others who have a stake in schooling. A straightforward, functional format facilitates user access.
Measurability: Is each standard measurable, observable, or verifiable in some way?	In general, standards should focus on the results, rather than the processes of teaching and learning. College and career-ready standards should make use of performance verbs that call for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills and should avoid using those that refer to learning activities — such as “examine,” “investigate,” and “explore” — or to cognitive processes, such as “appreciate.”