

Teachers say they would benefit from a deeper grounding in writing pedagogy.

Gary A. Troia

Writing Standards: Overcoming the Implementation Challenges

Writing is a cornerstone in the K-12 experience. Students write to demonstrate, support, and deepen understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their world—and to succeed on achievement tests in all subjects. Writing proficiency sets students up for postsecondary success and workforce participation.¹ It facilitates their social and civic activities and can reduce psychological and physical distress.² Yet roughly three-quarters of U.S. students do not write proficiently, a finding that has persisted over two decades.³

Thus it is no surprise that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by most states in 2010, sought to elevate the importance of writing instruction in schools and the expectations for student writing performance. But did the new standards alter the facts on the ground? Can they?

Can Learning Standards Improve Writing?

Learning standards for writing do influence teachers' writing instruction, largely by increasing the time they spend teaching writing (which survey data suggest has historically been quite limited).⁴ However, specific standards are open to interpretation and thus are negotiated through teachers' experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.⁵ To this point, some colleagues and I examined the impact of 26 states' writing standards (those in effect during the decade before CCSS) on eighth graders' writing performance as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.⁶ We found that variability in state writing standards did not significantly explain variation in students' writing performance and concluded that the effects of standards on student outcomes are likely fully mediated by what happens in

the classroom, reinforcing the idea that teacher traits and actions are pivotal to student success in writing.

A series of nationally representative polls of nearly 700 teachers suggested that teacher support for the CCSS had declined precipitously, from 76 percent in 2013 to 40 percent in 2015. And of those teachers reporting that the standards were used in their district, nearly half felt the standards had a negative effect on their schools.⁷ These same polls showed teachers were evenly divided on their support for annual accountability testing (the polls did not query teachers about their attitudes toward specific standards-aligned assessments).

Of course, teachers' perceptions are influenced by larger sociopolitical forces. Opposition to the new standards came from both the right and left sides of the political spectrum. Conservative opponents argued that the new standards represented federal intrusion on states' rights to set educational goals that best meet the needs of their citizens. Liberal opponents decried the involvement of influential nonprofit and corporate entities in the evolution, promotion, and implementation of the standards, entities they eyed with suspicion. Some of the opposition to standards may have been misplaced, reflecting concerns over new standards-aligned assessments rather than the standards themselves. Nevertheless, the political fallout was pronounced. Teachers' opposition likely reflected the negative sociopolitical climate in addition to dissatisfaction arising from their own experience. Moreover, teachers' less-than-sanguine attitudes toward the standards may have been aggravated by the contemporaneous deployment of new teacher evaluation systems that placed considerable weight on student outcomes.

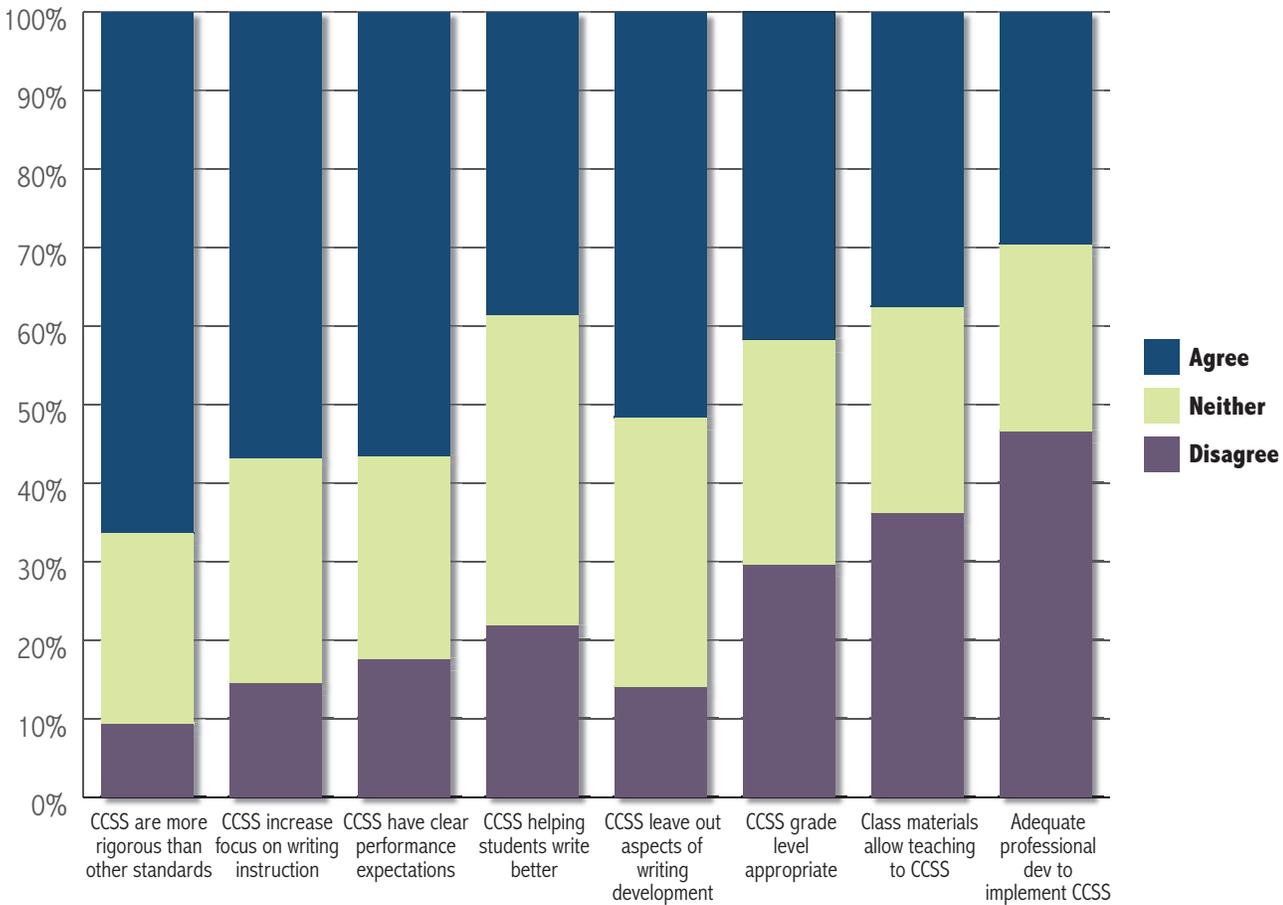
With respect to the Common Core writing and language standards specifically, a national survey of 482 grade 3 through 8 teachers that Steve Graham and I conducted in 2015 found that teachers were generally positive about the writing and language standards their state had adopted, regardless of whether teachers taught elementary or middle school (see figure 1).⁸ They perceived the standards to be rigorous, consistent, fairly coherent, and mostly appropriate for typical students, and they believed they had adequate administrative support for implementing the standards.

However, these same teachers believed they had not received sufficient professional learning opportunities on how to implement the writing and language standards. Nearly one in five reported that they were not even very familiar with the standards, a prerequisite for

faithful implementation. Other studies that have examined teachers' views of the broader Common Core through interviews and nonrandom sample surveys have reported similar shortcomings in knowledge of the standards and related professional development.⁹ Those teachers in the Troia-Graham survey who had more preservice coursework and had taken part in more job-embedded and independent professional learning activities that focused on effective writing instruction held stronger attitudes and beliefs about the standards (which, again, were largely positive), as did those teachers who reported more positive beliefs about their capabilities to teach writing to diverse students.

So what is to be made of the research on writing standards? Given that teachers (at least most elementary and middle school teachers) hold relatively positive beliefs and

Figure 1. Perceptions of CCSS for Writing and Language: Teachers Familiar with CCSS



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attitudes about the Common Core writing and language standards, they are more likely than not to support implementing them, which is good news for the state policymakers who adopted them. Further, those teachers who are better prepared to teach writing and feel more confident in their abilities to teach it appear to be even more enthusiastic. And it appears that teachers may feel more positively about Common Core writing and language standards than about the CCSS in general, perhaps because they perceive writing to have been the “neglected R,” and they welcome the opportunity to address the deficiency in the classroom,¹⁰ or perhaps because writing has not figured prominently in any education reform efforts and thus has been an inert aspect in the divisive political discourse around the CCSS. In any case, the standards have the potential to improve the long-standing poor writing performance of many children and adolescents in the U.S. if carefully implemented. It is this point that deserves further consideration, because as with many policy mandates, the devil is in the details, and several barriers to implementation are immediately evident.

Barriers to Implementing Learning Standards for Writing

One implementation barrier for the writing and language standards is teacher knowledge—knowledge about the standards and about effective practices to help students attain the standards. As noted previously, a sizable minority of teachers have reported being unfamiliar with Common Core standards related to writing and language, even five years after the standards were adopted in their states. These teachers need ongoing opportunities to deeply examine the following:

- the content and intent of the standards and grade-to-grade progressions;
- relationships between each standard and with standards in other subject areas;
- how student attainment of the standards is evaluated through district- and state-sanctioned assessments (and teacher-developed assessments) and how such assessment data can be used to identify students’ writing strengths and needs; and

- the degree to which the standards and writing curriculum materials align and how to address misalignment when it becomes evident.

Of course, knowledge of the standards alone will be inadequate because teachers must determine how to help their diverse students attain them. It will be advantageous to increase future and practicing teachers’ knowledge about and competence in writing development, instruction, and assessment to encourage widespread embrace of the goals of the writing and language standards. Teachers who are armed with deep knowledge about writing pedagogy and who believe they are capable of executing such pedagogy in the classroom may see the standards as a pathway to attain better student writing outcomes and therefore favor their implementation. Yet professional preparation in the domain of writing has been chronically inadequate,¹¹ in part because of the reading-centric view of literacy achievement that many preparation programs have taken.

In some cases, the standards themselves point the way to specific practices teachers might adopt. For instance, the Common Core standards at most grades expect students to gather and sort information about a topic, plan how they will communicate through writing their ideas about that topic, draft a piece of writing by hand or word processor, revise and edit their paper, and collaborate with others. The standards would lead most teachers to adopt a focus on the writing process given these particular elements and thus use process-based instruction, which is a modestly effective teaching practice.

But there is not much instructional guidance in the standards themselves, and the standards weren’t designed for that purpose in any case. In fact, Natalie Olinghouse and I found that the Common Core writing and language standards signaled (that is, the language in the standards pointed teachers toward a particular practice) no more than half of 36 identified evidence-based writing instruction practices across grades K-12.¹² Thus educators cannot rely on the standards alone to tell them how to teach writing. Other resources—most notably focused, coherent, and sustained professional development materials and activities—must be

consulted if teachers are to be well informed about what works in the teaching of writing. Teachers armed with deep knowledge of the standards, related practices, and how specific practices support students' attainment of those standards can help more K-12 students become proficient writers.

A second challenge to successful implementation is the nature of the standards themselves. For example, my colleagues and I have found that the writing and language standards do not treat transcription skills (spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding) in a comprehensive manner to address key developmental progressions in these skills (e.g., spelling beyond grade 3 is addressed with a single, vague standard calling for students to spell grade-appropriate words correctly, and only general references to handwriting are made in kindergarten and grade 1 and to keyboarding in grades 3-6).¹³ Sheila Carmichael and her colleagues likewise note that a number of the standards are repetitive across grades and do not clearly delineate a progression of rigor.¹⁴

It is unclear if the grade-level expectations for writing reflect the admittedly quite limited research on writing development.¹⁵ If the writing standards omit content related to important developmental milestones and potentially order explicated learning demands inappropriately, these problems may indeed present serious implementation difficulties. Though teachers cannot single-handedly alter the standards, they should be made aware of their inherent limitations and the implications for addressing student needs. Most teachers are likely to have to supplement the standards with additional instructional goals for students who lie between or beyond the margins of the explicated progressions in the standards.

A third implementation barrier is the lack of curricula to guide teachers' writing instruction.¹⁶ Such curricula serve as the nexus between standards and teaching: When strongly aligned with the standards, curricula can help teachers assist their students in meeting those standards in the ways intended by policymakers. Consequently, many teachers must invent a scope and sequence for the writing knowledge, skills, and strategies to be taught and must create instructional materials to be used that help students attain the standards and master writing across disciplines. Even among the small number of writing

curricula available, most do not demonstrate efficacy (i.e., proven to be efficacious in randomized controlled research trials) or, more important, effectiveness (i.e., demonstrate a measured positive impact on student writing outcomes when teachers use them).

Educators and entrepreneurs' efforts to develop and empirically validate writing curricula and instructional materials have gained some traction in recent years. For instance, a highly efficacious and effective writing strategy instruction model known as self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) has recently been commercialized by *thinkSRSD*, which provides teachers with CCSS-aligned curriculum guides, instructional lesson plans and materials, demonstration videos, and multimodal professional learning opportunities.¹⁷ Similarly, the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators has developed, piloted, revised, and deployed standards-aligned writing curricula and instructional units of study materials for use across schools in the state.

How Can Policymakers Support Better Implementation?

Policymakers such as state boards of education can help solve these implementation challenges in two ways. First, professional standards for practice must communicate the importance of effective writing instruction to student success across subject areas. Simultaneously, teacher education and credentialing programs should be required to provide in-depth coverage of writing development, learning standards, effective writing pedagogy, research-informed assessment, appropriate accommodations and modifications for struggling writers, and alignment between these elements—in other words, much more than is typically offered in courses on literacy instruction. Second, policymakers should ensure that districts and schools have access to evidence-based instructional practices and materials that have been thoroughly vetted. One place to locate such sources is the What Works Clearinghouse (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>) sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences, which provides practice guides, intervention reports, and research study reviews.

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in beginning reading in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Mandate that these tests are given. If you have the power to do it, do it. They are simple, and they do not take a lot of time.

There's a brilliant teacher professional development course called LETRS, designed by Louisa Moats, although I would add a comprehension piece, addressing knowledge and vocabulary, but that's eminently fixable. And you say elementary teachers who graduate from your teacher preparation program have to pass this assessment. If you take the course and pass it, you are done. Nothing else you need to do. Mandate that for teacher licensure for elementary teaching, and start assessment of student progress in kindergarten, first, and second and focus on reading itself. ■

¹"The Opportunity Myth" reports on an exhaustive review of thousands of student assignments and finds that only 17 percent of the assignments they reviewed met the standards for their grade level. Most assignments (including assigned readings) were below grade level. "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us about How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It" (Washington, DC: TNT, 2018).

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Of course, supports to help educators use these resources to meet their students' writing needs will be necessary. These include multi-modal, practice-based professional development, intensive coaching, and peer-to-peer mentoring networks in which teachers pilot, refine, and reflect on implementation of curricula and associated materials. ■

¹National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "The Neglected R: The Need for a Writing Revolution" (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2003); National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "Writing: A Ticket to Work...or a Ticket Out. A Survey of Business Leaders" (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2004).

²For instance, in a nationally representative sample of 700 adolescents, 85 percent reported using some form of electronic personal communication (e.g., text messages, social network posts, blogs, emails) for daily social interaction, self-exploration and expression, and reflection on current events. See National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "Writing, Technology, and Teens," Pew Internet and American Life Project (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2008); A.H.S. Harris, "Does Expressive Writing Reduce Health Care Utilization? A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Trials," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74 (2006): 243–52.

³Reports on writing assessment are available on the Nation's

Report Card website maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁴Laura Cutler and Steve Graham, "Primary Grade Writing Instruction: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 100 (2008): 907–19; Sharlene Kiuahara et al., "Teaching Writing to High School Students: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101 (2009): 136–60.

⁵Stephen P. Klein et al., "What Do Test Scores in Texas Tell Us?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8, no. 49 (2000): 1–20; Peggy O'Neill et al., "What Teachers Say about Different Kinds of Mandated State Writing Tests," *Journal of Writing Assessment* 2, no. 2 (2006): 81–108.

⁶Gary A. Troia et al., "Content and Alignment of State Writing Standards and Assessments as Predictors of Student Writing Achievement: An Analysis of 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress Data," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 31 (2018): 835–64.

⁷Michael B. Henderson et al., "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform: Public Thinking on Testing, Opt Out, Common Core, Unions, and More," *Education Next* 16, no. 1 (2016): 9–20.

⁸Gary A. Troia and Steve Graham, "Common Core Writing and Language Standards and Aligned State Assessments: A National Survey of Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 29 (2016): 1719–43.

⁹Lasisi Ajayi, "High School Teachers' Perspectives on the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: An Exploratory Study," *Education Research for Policy and Practice* 15 (2016): 1–25; Audrey F. Murphy and Elizabeth Haller, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Literacy Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 29 (2015): 510–27.

¹⁰National Commission on Writing, "The Neglected R."

¹¹Cutler and Graham, "Primary Grade Writing Instruction"; Ruie J. Pritchard and Ronald L. Honeycutt, "The Process Approach to Writing Instruction: Examining Its Effectiveness," In Charles A. MacArthur et al., eds., *Handbook of Writing Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2006); Gary A. Troia and Mary E. Maddox, "Writing Instruction in Middle Schools: Special and General Education Teachers Share Their Views and Voice Their Concerns," *Exceptionality* 12 (2004): 19–37.

¹²Gary A. Troia and Natalie G. Olinghouse, "The Common Core State Standards and Evidence-Based Educational Practices: The Case of Writing," *School Psychology Review* 42 (2013): 343–57.

¹³Gary A. Troia et al., "The Common Core Writing Standards: A Descriptive Study of Content and Alignment with a Sample of Former State Standards," *Reading Horizons Journal* 55, no. 3 (2016): 98–141.

¹⁴Sheila Byrd Carmichael et al., "The State of the State Standards—and Common Core—in 2010" (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation & Institute, 2010).

¹⁵Steve Graham and Karen R. Harris, "Common Core State Standards, Writing, and Students with LD: Recommendations," *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 28 (2013): 28–37.

¹⁶Troia and Maddox, "Writing Instruction in Middle Schools"; Jennifer Gilbert and Steve Graham, "Teaching Writing to Elementary Students in Grades 4 to 6: A National Survey," *The Elementary School Journal* 110 (2010): 494–518.

¹⁷Karen R. Harris et al., "Bring Powerful Writing Strategies into Your Classroom!" *The Reading Teacher* 66 (2013): 538–42.