

**Report of the
English Language Arts Alignment Committee**

Presented to the Governor's P-20 Leadership Council of Maryland

The Honorable Martin O'Malley, Chair

June 2008

Members of English Alignment Committee

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Members

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Background

In June 2007, the report of the English Composition Task Force, http://marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/C21C881E-AAA3-4D69-BDC2-E5C46C610E38/13533/FinalReportEnglishCompositionTaskForce_Rev82007.pdf, was approved by the Leadership Council of the Maryland Partnership for Teaching and Learning, PreK-16. This report included a number of recommendations to change the way in which English composition is taught at all levels. The action plan of this report called for the creation of a broad-based, statewide English Language Arts Alignment Committee (ELAAC) as a committee of the PreK-16 Workgroup. As its name implies, this committee was to study further the various alignment issues that arose during the deliberations of the original Task Force.

Specific Charge (approved by the former PreK-16 Leadership Council)

The English Language Arts Alignment Committee will engage the preK-16 community to align writing expectations between high school exit and college entry. To this end, it will pursue the following strategies:

- a) Review the exit standards for the highest level college/university developmental writing courses;
- b) Review the alignment of the preK-12 English language arts standards developed for the American Diploma Project;
- c) Establish a set of criteria for exemplary writing samples and anchor papers for use by English teachers preK-16 (examples to be drawn from across the grade spectrum);
- d) Develop entrance expectations for the first college-level writing course;
- e) Consider the current use in higher education of the “Standards for a ‘C’ Grade in English Composition” and the implications for their potential application in developing preK-12 exit writing standards; and
- f) Engage the preK-16 stakeholder communities in dialogue with the intent of securing commitment to the high school exit writing expectations and entrance standards for college writing.

Context

As the English Language Arts Alignment Committee was being organized, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) was deeply involved with redesigning its Voluntary State Curriculum for English Language Arts, Grades 9-12 (VSC) as part of its participation in the American Diploma Project. This redesign included two reviews by national panels of experts selected by Achieve, Inc., a highly regarded, standards-based advocacy group in Washington, DC that manages the American Diploma Project, to determine whether the VSC was aligned with world class standards. While the English Language Arts Alignment Committee was beginning its work, Achieve informed MSDE that the new curriculum did indeed, in the opinion of these outside experts, align with world class standards. At the same time, Achieve also informed MSDE that the VSC could be a model for other states in the American Diploma Project network. Having crossed that hurdle, it was now time for MSDE to solicit the input of higher education on the VSC document prior to taking it to the Maryland State Board of Education for adoption.

The English Language Arts Alignment Committee decided that in light of the new VSC, a large part of completing its charge would be to review the VSC and compare it to various other documents to determine the degree of alignment. The committee began its task in this regard by looking at two seminal documents used by community colleges – “Statement of Expectations for First-Year College Composition” and “Standards for a C Paper.” The “Statement of Expectations for First-Year College Composition” describes the common knowledge and skills requisite in first-year composition programs in postsecondary education. The “Standards for a C Paper” presents “standards” for students writing upon completion of the composition requirement.

The committee then looked at various rubrics (the SAT writing rubric, the Advanced Placement writing rubrics, and the rubrics used by MSDE for extended constructed responses). The committee recognized that extended constructed responses were being phased out from the high school assessments, but felt that it still needed to consider this rubric as well as the others to ensure that the expectations of satisfactory papers based on a wide variety of rubrics could indeed be found in the new VSC. The committee also reviewed the outcomes for community college highest level developmental courses, once again to ensure that these outcomes could indeed be identified in the new VSC. There was general consensus among the committee that excellent alignment exists between and among these documents and the VSC.

Committee Discussion

In general, the committee agreed that the new VSC was a major step forward for English Language Arts in PreK-12. There was great enthusiasm among higher education members of the committee for receiving students who would be taught under such a curriculum, understanding that the curriculum had not yet even been presented to the State Board of Education. Once that occurs, it will be distributed widely. Local school systems will then review their own existing English Language Arts curricula to make sure that they are aligned with this new document. There will also be a significant amount of professional development required to implement this new curriculum.

There were some specific suggestions surrounding the new VSC that arose in the higher education subcommittee, and the whole committee recommends that the new VSC be revised to take into account these recommendations before it is presented to the State Board of Education. These suggestions are as follows:

1. On page 2, the group suggests that in the Grades 9-12 section (third bullet), reference should be made to non-Western sources as well as Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon roots.
2. On page 7 (Indicator 2.1), the group suggests that there needs to be more of a focus on non-fiction here and throughout the document. Far too many students arrive at college having read a preponderance of fiction, often at the expense of non-fiction.
3. On page 11 in the Grades 9-10 section, the group wants to change the language of the third from last bullet to: “Demonstrate the ability to integrate ideas from a variety of sources using paraphrase, quotations, citations, and summaries into written text.”

4. On page 11 in the Grades 11-12 section, the group wants to amend the second to last bullet to read: “Integrate paraphrase, quotations, citations, and summaries into written text skillfully in order to maintain the flow of ideas.”
5. On page 19, the group wants to change the language in the Grades 9-10 section, fourth bullet from the bottom to: “Use a resource for punctuation and capitalization conventions.”
6. On page 21, the group wants to add language in the third to last bullet to recommend to local school systems that they adopt one style manual for their English Language Arts teachers so that there is consistency across each system and so teachers are not developing their own “style manual” for students.

In addition, there was general discussion about communication among PreK-12 and higher education regarding students with disabilities and the accommodations they will likely require if they are to be successful in college. There are certainly impediments to improved communication because of existing privacy laws. Although this discussion was not a direct part of the charge to the committee, the committee felt nevertheless that at least in part the reason why a number of students may not be successful in their first credit-bearing college writing course is because the college is not aware of the disabilities that the student has unless the student self discloses that information and the need for accommodations. Specific institutions of higher education may require assessment information for the student that has been completed within the last six months of student enrollment. Also, this type of assessment may have to be completed independently and at parent or student expense. Regarding students with Section 504 Plans, they may not have updated assessment information.

Finally, the committee learned that changes could not be made to the language of the “assessment limits” in the VSC since the Maryland assessment program is based on these assessment limits and the entire construct of the assessments would also have to change. That would be a huge expense, and it would have to be weighed against the benefit of making the change. None of the above suggestions, however, are affected by the assessment limits.

Recommendations

The committee has the following recommendations:

1. The Maryland State Department of Education should adopt the six committee suggestions presented above regarding the new VSC before it is presented to the Maryland State Board of Education.
2. Once the report of the English Language Arts Alignment Committee is presented to the P-20 Leadership Council, it should be distributed in a timely manner to the agencies in the P-20 Partnership as well as all appropriate P-20 stakeholders.
3. The P-20 Leadership Council should sponsor a Governor’s Conference on Writing in the spring of 2009 with the purpose of bringing together the preK-12 and higher education communities to examine issues related to student writing, including topics such as alignment of expectations, promising practices, examination of student work, ongoing professional development opportunities in the area of writing, and partnerships between PreK-12 and higher education.

4. When the Voluntary State Curriculum documents are revised in disciplines outside of English Language Arts, writing should be explicitly included as a key component in those curricula.
5. Each Institution of Higher Education (IHE) should create a writing placement page on its website that explains the placement process at that institution, posts appropriate cut scores from the institution's placement instrument, and indicates the criteria for placement into the first credit-bearing English course. IHEs should also post samples of sample writing that demonstrate the expectations of the first-required writing course.
6. MSDE should develop a web page/portal linking to a summary of each IHEs college writing placement process and provide a link to each institution's showcase page.

Implementation of Voluntary State Curriculum

Assuming that the above recommendations could be implemented without much difficulty, the committee is concerned about the timing of the implementation of the new VSC. It is extremely important that the State Board adopt the VSC as soon as possible. It is further important that the curriculum be distributed to local school districts in a timely manner so that they can begin the process of adjusting their own curricula and providing professional development for teachers. The committee is enthusiastic about the prospects of better writers coming out of our high schools, and it would like to see the process accelerated as much as possible since this process will be a multi-year effort before the VSC is fully implemented.

Criteria for Exemplary Writing Samples

The committee concluded from the examination of the VSC and other rubrics that appropriate criteria for exemplary writing have already been established through the VSC. However, the manifestation of these criteria will be most effectively exemplified through writing samples specific to each institution's writing program because the context and parameters for writing samples need to be understood within a specific frame of reference. Different colleges and universities have different missions, serve different student populations, and have different entrance requirements. Placement methods for first-year writing as well as relevant writing samples should address the needs and expectations of individual institutions and their entering students, according to professional organizations such as Conference on College Composition and Communication and composition scholars.

In place of a set of anchor papers, the committee made several recommendations to address the underlying concerns in this aspect of its charge. Recommendation 5 above aims to provide high school teachers, students and their parents with the information needed to understand placement processes and writing expectations for entering the credit bearing writing course at a particular institution. Recommendation 6 is aimed at making the information from various institutions readily accessible to all. Finally, Recommendation 3 focuses on developing connections among high school and college English teachers for exchanging information about standards, expectations, and curriculum and establishing meaningful professional relationships that span the high

school-college divide. Committee members agreed that this kind of interaction is the most effective way to establish shared criteria and dialogue.

Appendix A

Voluntary State Curriculum for English Language Arts, Grades 9-12 (VSC)