

Are Texas' English language arts and reading standards college ready?



College readiness has emerged as a national issue, due in part to repeated findings that many first-year college students are required to take remedial courses (for example, Provasnik and Planty 2008; Terry 2007). In response, several sets of national college readiness standards (content statements that define what students should know in specific areas) have been developed, such as the ACT College Readiness Standards (ACT, Inc. 2007) and the American Diploma Project (ADP) College and Workplace Readiness Benchmarks (Achieve, Inc. 2004). An emphasis on college readiness standards is also evident in the criteria for distribution of American Reinvestment and Recovery Act education funds (U.S.

Department of Education 2009) and in the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which resulted in the development of a set of K–12 English language arts and mathematics standards that include college readiness standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010). In Texas, recent legislation has focused on developing college readiness standards, vertically aligning the state's K–12 curriculum to those standards through a logical progression for teaching content in a subject area across grades (Texas Legislature 2006), and raising state standards for student performance to move Texas into the top 10 states in college readiness by 2019/20 (Texas Legislature 2009).

Given this context, it is important for Texas policymakers to understand how the newly developed state standards compare with national college readiness standards sets. To support Texas' efforts, the Regional Education Laboratory Southwest (REL Southwest) conducted a study to compare the content (the knowledge and skills stated or implied in a standards statement) and cognitive complexity (the depth of knowledge or reasoning required to demonstrate the knowledge and skills in a standards statement) of the ACT and ADP national college readiness standards sets with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills English language arts and reading (TEKS ELAR; Texas Education Agency 2008) standards for grades 9 – 12. **This study is intended to inform policymakers about the alignment of the 2008 TEKS ELAR standards to national college readiness standards sets and to inform state efforts to revise the standards in the future.**

Description of college readiness standards sets

ADP

The American Diploma Project (ADP) is an initiative of Achieve, Inc., a bipartisan, non-profit education reform organization. The current ADP network includes 35 states (Achieve, Inc. 2009) and has a stated goal of aligning and raising state standards and assessments to a level that will prepare students for success in postsecondary education. The ADP English language arts standards are divided into eight strands: communication, informational text, language, literature, logic, media, research, and writing.

ACT

ACT, Inc., the publisher of the ACT college admissions test, created the ACT College Readiness Standards. The ACT college readiness standards are intended to represent the knowledge and skills (content) and type of thinking (cognitive complexity) required for students to succeed in entry-level college courses (Act, Inc. 2007). The ACT college readiness standards are empirically linked to ACT assessment scores and are the only set of college readiness standards explicitly linked to a measure of student achievement. The ACT English language arts college readiness standards are divided into three clusters of related standards statements (called strands): English, reading, and writing.

TEKS ELAR

The TEKS ELAR standards (Texas Education Agency 2008) are a set of K – 12 standards that define the knowledge and skills that are required as students progress from grade to grade in Texas public schools. This set of vertically aligned standards forms the

basis of curricula and assessment in the state. The current TEKS ELAR were approved and adopted in 2008. The current study used the grade 9 – 12 English language arts standards for the four English courses required for graduation (English I – IV) for comparison. The TEKS ELAR standards are divided into five strands: listening and speaking, oral and written conventions, reading, research, and writing.

Study methodology

This study used a rigorous review process to conduct two pairwise comparisons, separately aligning the ACT and ADP standards sets with the TEKS ELAR standards set. ACT and ADP were designated, in turn, as the benchmark set of standards and aligned with the TEKS ELAR comparison set of standards. Reviewers examined individual standards statements to determine if content was aligned (or shared); reviewers then determined at what level the content in the benchmark standards set statement aligned with the content in the comparison standards set statement on a three-level content alignment rating scale (*fully, partially, not aligned*).

- **Fully aligned** was defined as 100 percent shared content;
- **Partially aligned** was defined as 1 – 99 percent shared content;
- **Not aligned** was defined as 0 percent shared content.

In addition, the reviewers analyzed the cognitive complexity (level of reasoning) expected of students in each college readiness standards statement using Webb's four-level Depth of Knowledge (DoK) scale—from the least complex to the most complex—which includes:

- level 1, recall;
- level 2, skill/concept;
- level 3, strategic thinking; and
- level 4, extended thinking (Webb 2002).

The result was the creation of a content alignment table for the two comparisons (ACT–TEKS ELAR, ADP–TEKS ELAR) and a cognitive complexity rating table for each set of standards. These tables are available upon request from REL Southwest.



Major Findings

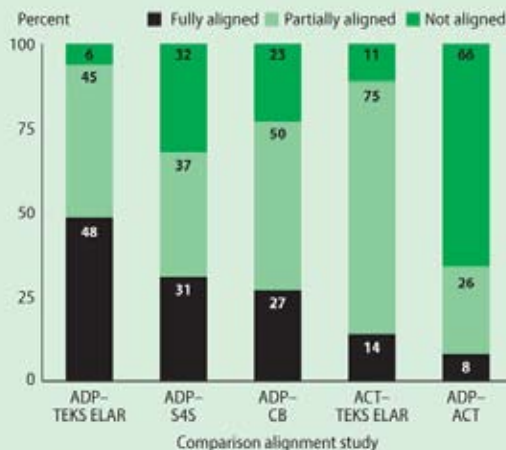
Content alignment findings

A majority of the content in the ACT and ADP college readiness standards sets is addressed to some extent by the TEKS ELAR standards. Specifically,

- 14 percent of ACT statements and 48 percent of ADP statements fully align with TEKS ELAR statements and
- 75 percent of ACT statements and 45 percent of ADP statements partially align

These results are difficult to interpret in isolation, as there are no universally accepted criteria for determining good or poor levels of alignment. Reporting the findings in relation to another standards-to-standards alignment study (Rolfhus et al. 2010) can provide context for interpreting the findings. Rolfhus et al. focused on three pairwise comparisons of national English language arts college readiness standards, using ADP as the benchmark. Of the five total pairwise comparisons (three in Rolfhus et al. and two in the current study), the ADP-TEKS ELAR comparison in the current study has the highest percentage of both fully aligned content and combined fully and partially aligned content. The ACT-TEKS ELAR comparison in the current study ranks fourth in fully aligned content and second in combined fully and partially aligned content. **These two studies indicate that TEKS ELAR aligns more closely to ADP than any of the three other national English language arts college readiness standards examined (ACT, College Board [The College Board 2006], Standards for Success [Conley 2003]).**

FIGURE F1
Alignment study findings ordered by percentage of fully aligned standards statements, 2009



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
ADP = American Diploma Project; TEKS ELAR = Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English language arts and reading; S4S = Standards for Success; CB = College Board.
Source: Rolfhus et al. 2010; summary of reviewer ratings completed June–August 2009 drawing on standards statements in ACT, Inc. (2007), Achieve, Inc. (2004), and Texas Education Agency (2008).

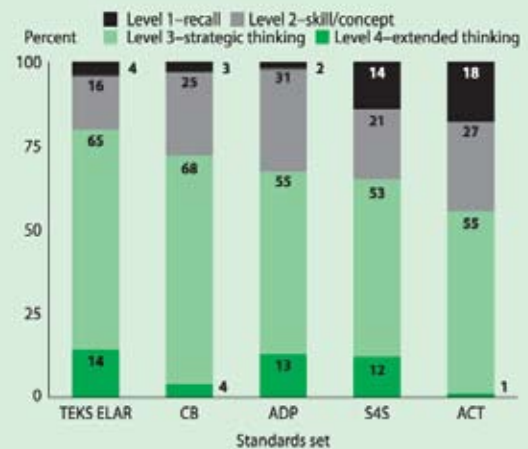
See p. 40 of the Final Report for full explanation of chart.

Cognitive Complexity Findings

- Each of the four levels of cognitive complexity (recall, skill/concept, strategic thinking, and extended thinking) was represented in each of the standards sets.
- TEKS ELAR has more statements rated at level 3, strategic thinking, and level 4, extended thinking, than do ACT or ADP.

The TEKS ELAR standards demand higher levels of reasoning (on a four-level cognitive complexity scale) than the ACT or ADP standards. For example, higher levels of reasoning are required to make complex inferences (level 3) than to retrieve facts (level 1). In addition, TEKS ELAR standards demand higher levels of reasoning than two other sets of college readiness standards examined in Rolfhus et al. (2010).

FIGURE F3
Alignment study findings ordered by percentage of standards statements rated at the combined highest levels of cognitive complexity (3 and 4) on the Webb depth of knowledge scale, 2009



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
TEKS ELAR = Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English language arts and reading; CB = College Board; ADP = American Diploma Project; S4S = Standards for Success.
Source: Rolfhus et al. 2010; summary of reviewer ratings completed June–August 2009 drawing on standards statements in ACT, Inc. (2007), Achieve, Inc. (2004), and Texas Education Agency (2008).

See p. 40 – 41 of the Final Report for full explanation of chart.

Key Questions for Texas Policymakers

Key findings of this study for Texas policymakers are that 1) a majority of content in the ACT and ADP college readiness standards sets is addressed to some extent by the TEKS ELAR standards, and 2) the TEKS ELAR statements demand higher levels of cognitive complexity than four national college readiness standards sets (ACT, ADP, College Board, Standards for Success). As policymakers consider future college readiness legislation for Texas students and possible changes to the state standards, potential questions include:

- What existing college readiness standards will best inform future revisions of the TEKS ELAR to align with the demands of postsecondary education?
- How important is it to align the TEKS ELAR more closely to other national college readiness standards sets?
- How should future revisions to standards statements be worded to reflect the intended cognitive demands on students?

To access the full report, *Are Texas' English language arts and reading standards college ready?*, visit: www.EdvanceResearch.com/RELSouthwest/Publications

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