Assessing Alignment to the Common Core State Standards

A Curriculum Review Tool for English Language Arts

A Union of Professionals

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Introduction

The American Federation of Teachers strongly supports the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), believing they are the best path to a more focused, coherent curriculum that will allow teachers to address content in greater depth and students to retain what they've learned. With the widespread adoption of the CCSS and a new wave of curriculum writing and textbook adoptions—every publisher is making claims that its materials support these standards. The AFT historically has avoided endorsing specific textbooks and programs, but many of our members serve on state or local curriculum framework committees and on local textbook adoption committees. This tool, developed with strong input from teachers, is intended to assist them in that work by providing guidance to drive the development of curricula and instructional resources that facilitate real and significant improvements in teaching and learning. To keep the intended goals of fewer, more rigorous and more coherent standards in mind, it is important that the people who use this tool be familiar with the Common Core standards before they begin to examine materials or to develop curriculum or curriculum frameworks. Reviewers should note that these standards:

- Reiterate the critical importance of systematic teaching of the foundational skills of reading, language and writing, with approaches grounded in scientific research;

- Are based on an integrated model of literacy in which reading and writing are dependent upon proficiency in language, including oral language comprehension and use;

- Have added intentional emphasis on speaking and listening, writing, informational text, inquiry and research, and the use and integration of media/technology;

- Increase expectations for depth of teaching and student understanding of concepts; and

- Delineate clear grade-by-grade progressions.

This tool is intended to be used to evaluate a curriculum as defined in the AFT publication, "Making Standards Matter, 2001":

A curriculum does what standards can't do. It provides teachers with a detailed road map—which is neither overly broad nor prescriptive—for helping students reach the standards. It is the "how to" guide for teachers. It conveys the "what" of the standards, and it clarifies how much of the "what" is good enough. The curriculum provides information to teachers about the content, instructional strategies, and complexity of student performance levels necessary to meet standards.

To be complete, a curriculum must be grade by grade, and contain the following five components:

- *Learning Continuum, which shows the progression and development of knowledge and skill from grade to grade;*

- *Instructional Resources, which include suggested print, digital texts and tools;*

- *Instructional Strategies, which are research-based techniques teachers can use to help teach the standards and to help students meet the standards;*

- *Performance Indicators, which demonstrate the level of mastery and show how much is good enough; and*

- *Instructional Plans (examples), which can provide teachers with guidance and common understanding of essential instructional components, content and learning experiences to facilitate students' mastery of the standards and content.*

An additional, essential component of curriculum, for the purposes of this evaluation tool, is:

- **Alignment with the CCSS for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects.**

This evaluation tool can help the user determine:

- Whether the proposed curriculum or the instructional program selected to support it includes components and methods that have been proven effective in achieving curricular goals;

- Whether critical components of the curriculum are missing (and if so, what they are) from the core instructional program under consideration, and if the instructional program nevertheless is adopted, what aspects of the curriculum will need to be supplemented locally;

- Whether sequencing of content is validated or supported by research;

- Whether instructional language, quality of explanations, etc., are clear and appropriate; and

- Whether the curricula under consideration really align with the CCSS.

If this tool is used to evaluate a curriculum framework, a set of curriculum maps or a published program to be used in implementing the curriculum, users will need to assess the distinct component and also the extent to which it delineates a coherent course of study for students that realistically can be taught by teachers who have constraints on time, class size and material resources.

This tool will not tell the user about the quality of specific recommended texts or whether to select a particular instructional program.

Scoring

The indicators that follow are intended to guide your consideration of a curriculum or core program by assessing the extent to which it meets certain criteria. The AFT has deemed that some features of a curriculum and/or core program, such as alignment with the CCSS and alignment across the English Language Arts (ELA) strands, will carry more weight in this evaluation than some other items. Such criteria are essential and non-negotiable, and therefore they are highlighted in bold.

Indicate which symbol best describes the extent to which the program meets each criterion.

◯ Not at all
◖ Minimally
◒ Partially
◕ Mostly
● Completely

Measuring Key Components of a Curriculum or of an Instructional Program

Alignment with the CCSS

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum or instructional program:

Addresses all the Common Core State Standards at the appropriate grade level.

Shows alignment of the CCSS within every ELA strand (Reading, *including Foundational Skills*, Writing, Speaking & Listening, and Language).

Includes alignment across ELA strands.

Reflects the CCSS research-based learning progressions in the sequences in the material.

Makes connections among various domains, for instance:

　　Ties letter knowledge and phoneme awareness to phonic decoding;

　　Ties phonic decoding to the learning of word meanings;

　　Ties the learning of word meanings to learning about topical content;

　　Ties language skills to written expression; and

　　Encourages the continual interplay of spoken and written language use.

Provides appropriate, ample educational opportunities for students' application, practice and mastery of each standard.

Minimizes the inclusion of material/content that is irrelevant and/or unrelated to the standard(s).

Format and Structure

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum or instructional program:

Is coherent by reflecting:

　　A sequence of skill development and/or concept development that is logical and consistent with the hierarchical nature of the skills/concepts, as documented in scientific reading research; and

　　Instruction on both critical content and on how knowledge is organized and generated within the content areas of reading, language and writing.

Is in a teacher-friendly format in which the format and language are accessible and practical for classroom instruction by teachers of diverse backgrounds, knowledge and skill.

KEY: ◯ Not at all　◔ Minimally　◑ Partially　◕ Mostly　● Completely

The Learning Continuum

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum or instructional program:

Is based on the research consensus about reading acquisition, language development and writing development.

Recognizes language and literacy as core areas for instruction and situates language and literacy development as foundational to the use of language and literacy as a means of gaining and applying knowledge.

Follows a logical progression by:

Making clear what are the prerequisite skills and concepts students need in order to access new skills and concepts;

Including information to enable the teacher to situate the targeted learning in relation to previously taught concepts and to subsequent learning; and

Including a visual (e.g., a scope and sequence chart) to show the learning progressions within domains as they develop and conclude over the years.

Outlines a grade-by-grade progression of learning that accurately reflects the standards.

Outlines instruction for any grade level that covers the range, as set by the standards, between the end of the prior grade and the end of the current grade.

Deliberately, explicitly and cumulatively weaves the essential language skills on which reading and writing depend into a series of cumulative lessons in which students meet proficiency criteria as they progress.

Includes only lessons that:

Build upon the knowledge, understanding or skills students have previously acquired, as measured by formative assessments;

Include a focus on ELA knowledge and skills as well as a focus on conceptual knowledge building;

Consist of both explicit and implicit instruction;

Embed systematic skill-building in ways that engage students, spark their imagination and motivate them to read more; and

Include guidance for teachers about identifying and anticipating challenges inherent in the lesson and suggestions for providing extra support for students who may need it.

Includes only units that:

Focus on educationally worthwhile topics as "big ideas" through which concept knowledge is built; and

○◑◑◐● **Clearly show coherent and systematic progression in the development of the targeted ELA component(s).**

○◑◑◐● **Includes instructional goals and student learning tasks that draw on multiple standards within and across the ELA CCSS strands.**

Facilitates learning by all students through:

○◑◑◐● **Differentiated instruction designed to meet students' reading, language and writing needs that have been identified by screening and progress-monitoring assessments; and**

○◑◑◐● **Provision of sufficient opportunities for intervention and support for students who start the grade at achievement levels substantially below or above the current grade.**

○◑◑◐● **Provides sufficient learning experiences and opportunities for discussion so that students can develop deep understanding of content.**

Instructional Resources

The following criteria pertain to the evaluation of the printed (or Web-based) reading materials aligned to the curriculum. These materials might be from a core or supplemental instructional program (whether developed locally or purchased from a vendor and which stands in lieu of a curriculum). Some curricula or curriculum frameworks may offer guidelines or suggestions about resources without listing the actual resources to be used—leaving the choice of specific resources up to the teacher. In that case, evaluators should consider whether the guidelines on resources appear to lead the teacher to select and use instructional materials that would meet the expectations below.

Indicate the extent to which the instructional resources:

○◑◑◐● **Provide an overview of the research that guided the development of the resource(s).**

○◑◑◐● **Identify the characteristics of the students for which they were designed or on whom they were validated in implementation studies.**

○◑◑◐● **Identify which standards or areas of literacy instruction the materials are designed to meet.**

○◑◑◐● **Use consistent language in terms of standards across content areas and grade levels.**

○◑◑◐● Have clear and explicit guidelines to support teaching all aspects of the units/concepts/lessons.

○◑◑◐● **Clearly delineate which resources are appropriate and/or essential for subgroups of student learners differentiated by their need for intervention or acceleration in one or more of the components of literacy.**

○◑◑◐● **Identify and explicitly anticipate common errors or misconceptions to facilitate teacher scaffolding of student learning.**

○◑◐◕● **Include and privilege well-crafted, text-dependent questioning to facilitate students' comprehension of the text itself.**

○◑◐◕● **Include instructional experiences to facilitate students' application of skills and concepts in new situations.**

○◑◐◕● **Make cross-curricular connections to help students build background knowledge.**

○◑◐◕● **Include texts and reading materials within each unit that systematically build concept knowledge of the educationally worthwhile topic.**

○◑◐◕● **Reflect the complexity level of reading materials consistent with the text complexity guidelines delineated in the CCSS Appendix A and its supplement.**

○◑◐◕● **Include texts of appropriate complexity to facilitate every student's access to text, as well as texts of increasing complexity through which to facilitate students' development to meet the complexity expectations of the current grade.**

○◑◐◕● **Include formative assessments that measure students' progress toward meeting the standard(s), produce data to inform instruction, and are aligned to the expectations of the summative assessment.**

○◑◐◕● **Use language in student resources appropriate for the grade levels and targeted instructional level (e.g., remediation, acceleration or extension).**

○◑◐◕● **Are appropriate to meet the diverse needs of learners—that is, the materials:**

○◑◐◕● **Are consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL);**

○◑◐◕● **Are accessible by all students;**

○◑◐◕● **Reflect uniformly high quality across all targeted learner subgroups; and**

○◑◐◕● **Include appropriate levels of intervention consistent with Response to Intervention models.**

○◑◐◕● **Have a visual representation/chart of which standards are targeted for which lessons/units.**

○◑◐◕● **Are written with clear and grade-appropriate explanations, visuals and examples.**

○◑◐◕● **Include reading materials that reflect diversity, including but not limited to:**

○◑◐◕● **Readability level;**

○◑◐◕● **Author demographics;**

○◑◐◕● **Genre;**

○◑◐◕● **Publication date;**

○◑◐◕● **Format;**

○◑◐◕● **Myriad media types (e.g., print, digital, audio, electronic);**

○◑◐◕● **Proportion of informational and narrative texts;**

KEY: ○ Not at all ◑ Minimally ◐ Partially ◕ Mostly ● Completely

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ●   **Student interests;**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ●   **Reflection of global diversity; and**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ●   **Real world application.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Are free from bias against and stereotypes of all populations.**

Include Web-based materials specific to CCSS that are:

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ●   **Maintained in a way to ensure their currency; and**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ●   **Interactive.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Are easy to navigate and contain useful material for students and instructors.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● Are presented in a way that can deepen the content knowledge of teachers.

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● Are available to support home-school collaboration.

Research-Based Instructional Strategies

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum includes instructional strategies that:

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Reflect current knowledge about effective teaching and learning practices in the field and provide explanations and rationale.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● Include a variety of suggested instructional practices across concepts, topics, units and lessons.

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Include a variety of strategies to assist students who, based on analysis of student data, have either failed to meet, met or exceeded expectations.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Include research-based alternative strategies specific to specialized student populations (e.g., English language learners (ELLs), students with special needs—including those with complex communication needs, gifted and talented students, struggling readers, etc.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Are consistent with the principles of UDL.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Foster discourse of all kinds that will deepen student understanding.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Include opportunities for reasoning and justification that will deepen student understanding.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Provide opportunities for students to use their creativity to acquire and demonstrate knowledge, concepts and skills.**

○ ◑ ◒ ◐ ● **Encourage reflective practice by the teacher.**

Indicators of Student Mastery

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum includes various types of indicators of student mastery that:

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Provide options for student demonstration of mastery consistent with the principles of UDL.**

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum or instructional program contains performance indicators that:

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Include clear performance descriptors and criteria necessary to demonstrate mastery of the standards.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Include rubrics or scoring guides that define the features of student work that meet, exceed or fail to meet the standards.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Include examples of student work demonstrating mastery of standard(s) and various performance levels relating to mastery of standards within each grade.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Include samples of student work with commentary that explains to teachers why the work does or does not meet the expectations described in the rubric.**

ASSESSMENT

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum fosters or the core program provides assessment that:

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Is valid and reliable for specific purposes.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Is clearly aligned with the CCSS.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Is clearly aligned with the curriculum.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Is clearly aligned with the resources.**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Includes a variety of assessment tools, including but not limited to:**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Teacher-administered assessments;**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Student self-assessments;**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Formative assessments;**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Formative assessments that are embedded in instruction;**

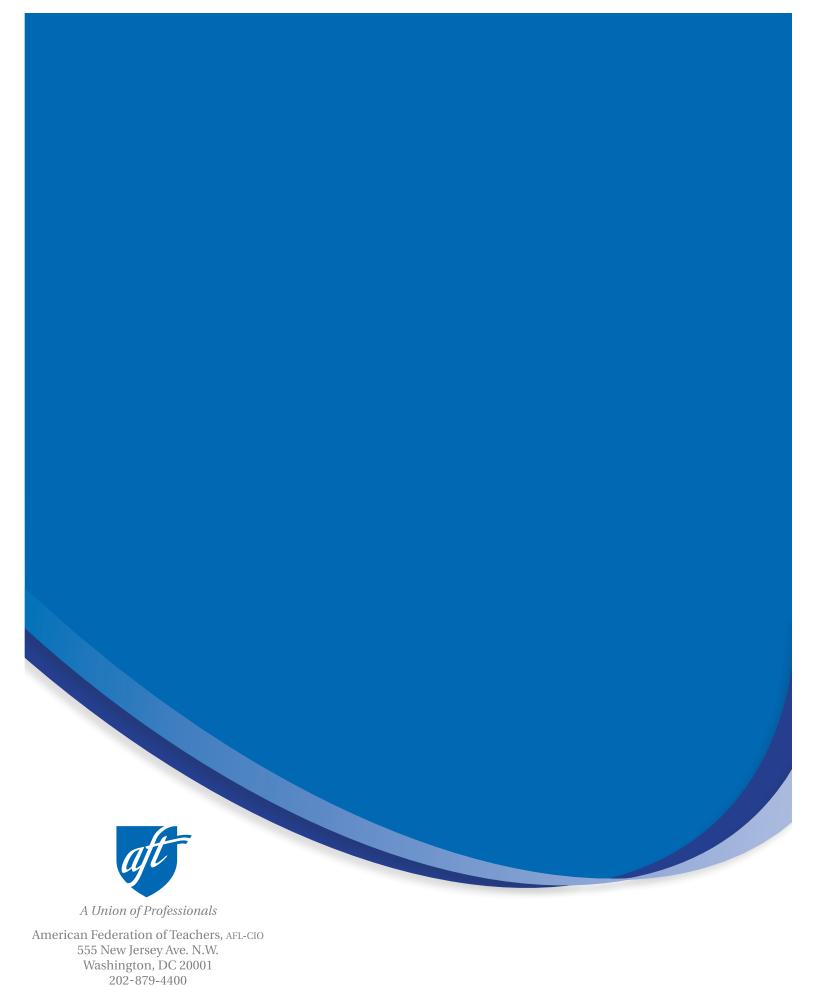◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Formal and informal assessments;**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Summative assessments; and**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   **Assessments available in myriad media (e.g., oral, written, digital, visual, etc.).**

◯◑⬤◗⬤   Has multiple items available to assess each concept so that reassessment is not compromised by having to repeat previously used items.

◯◑⬤◗⬤   Has multiple items available to measure the range of expectations for student mastery.

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Measures the range of cognitive levels, like those delineated in Bloom's Taxonomy or similar scales.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Produces data to clearly inform intervention and remedial instruction.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Produces data to clearly inform instruction to extend beyond mastery of the standard(s).**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Defines each task on the assessment in language (e.g., vocabulary, syntax) that is understandable and is not a barrier to students' demonstration of content knowledge.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Accurately links assessment items to the intended standards.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ Promotes teachers' understanding of the level of performance required for mastery.

Instructional Plans (Example)

Indicate the extent to which the curriculum or the instructional program includes sample instructional plans that:

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Provide examples of instruction of concepts/topics/units for every grade.**

Include:

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Specification of the standard(s) being addressed;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Goals and objectives for each concept/unit/topic as well as essential questions by section;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Description of the prior knowledge students need;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Description of instruction to build the necessary background knowledge;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Integration of two or more standards, as appropriate;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **A listing of all materials and resources needed to complete the lesson;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Classroom assessments and/or performance tasks;**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Rubrics and sample student work; and**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Specification of the estimated time needed to complete the lesson and/or unit.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ Connect learning experiences explicitly and tightly to the lesson's goals and objectives.

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Are user-friendly.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Are coherent, featuring a logical flow within lessons and progressions.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Use diverse instructional strategies, including inquiry and direct instruction, to enhance student engagement.**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Are developed for a variety of time frames (e.g., block schedule, units, lesson, 40-minute classes, etc.).**

◯◑◕◔⬤ **Are demonstrative of various stages (introduction, practice, mastery, etc.) within the unit.**