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# Deadline nears for new language arts curriculum

Overhaul would alter expectations for schoolchildren

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## WHAT'S EXPECTED?

Here's a sampling of some of the more than 100 objectives in the current fourth-grade Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills. Many are repeated in other grade levels. Students are expected to:

- **Eliminate** barriers to effective listening.
- **Compare** oral traditions across regions and cultures.
- **Read** silently with increasing ease for longer periods.
- **Read** classic and contemporary works.
- **Describe** mental images that text descriptions evoke.
- **Distinguish** fact and opinion in various texts.
- **Write** legibly by selecting cursive or manuscript as appropriate.
- **Spell** accurately in final drafts.
- **Proofread** his/her own writing and that of others.
- **Correspond** with peers or others via e-mail or conventional mail.

Source: Texas Education Agency

After two years of hand-wringing, state education officials face a tight deadline as they begin voicing opinions today on a major rewrite of the language arts curriculum, which spells out what every schoolchild in Texas will be taught about reading, literature and grammar.

The document — which was outsourced for completion last fall after state officials decided they couldn't finish revising it in time — is due for a final vote by the State Board of Education in April.

That decision will trigger the adoption of about \$1 billion in new textbooks and a costly update to the state's high-stakes standardized test.

"It has huge implications for what we do in the classroom," said Carolyn Johnson, the language arts coordinator for the Katy school district. "I wouldn't say I'm lying awake at night, but I'm eager to see what the changes are."

Some educators are worried that the rushed process will leave little time for input from Texas teachers.

They wouldn't be the first group upset by the process. The new standards will replace those adopted in 1997 — a process so controversial that then-Gov. George W. Bush's mansion was picketed. Hundreds of teachers spoke out against the language arts curriculum; one even authored a rival version.

"That was a fascinating experience. I was amazed at the politics in the process," said Kay Allen, director of Houston's Neuhaus Education Center and a member of the committee that wrote the last set of language arts standards.

## **Setting new standards**

Two years ago, the state board convened a committee of educators to tweak the 1997 document. Board members ultimately decided a more drastic overhaul was needed, agreeing late last fall to spend \$85,112 to outsource the work to StandardsWork, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit.

The group was charged with compiling input from politicians, educators and experts, who complained that the current curriculum was too long, too repetitive and included too many objectives that were impossible to measure.

"Sixth, seventh and eighth grade were exactly the same," said Don McLeroy, a Bryan dentist who presides over the state board.

McLeroy, like others, wanted to make sure that standards became increasingly difficult as students get older.

Rather than just state that children should learn to write narratives, for instance, the new document specifies that kindergartners should be able to dictate information to an adult. Third-graders should be able to write a letter to a specific audience and purpose, while 12th-graders are asked to be able to write short stories, the draft document says.

"In the previous document, there was a lot of 'ditto,' or repetition," StandardsWork president Barbara Davidson said. "It's all in the verbs. That's what the elevating of the expectation in a particular strand will be. That's what we call progression."

An early version of StandardsWork's changes has been well-received by the original committee of educators, whose initial feedback is being included in the document, Davidson said.

"I don't want to jinx it, but I'm feeling pretty optimistic," she said. "It's far more user-friendly and the language is clear and straightforward."

One promise Davidson said she couldn't make is that the new document will be shorter.

"When you have clear, specific standards, sometimes it seems like there's a lot of them," she said. "Teachers will be able to look at this and say, 'Ahhh. Now I know what we're looking for.' "

## **On a time crunch**

State board member Terri Leo, R-Spring, was thrilled to see a separate grammar strand in the revision.

"Kids don't get things by osmosis. You have to deliberately teach grammar," she said.

Leo applauded the state for outsourcing the work and said she knows the board must work quickly to finish the job.

"We, as a board, by delaying things, put TEA in a time crunch and their backs against the wall," she said. "We are seriously crunched."

The state board is scheduled to have a special meeting on the standards Feb. 13 and adopt them April 21.

Houston-area teachers are hoping the complexities of their subject matter aren't edited out of the new standards.

"Some concerns are, you don't leave something out that's critical, just because it's not easily measurable," said Julie Anderson, coordinator of elementary language arts for the Cypress-Fairbanks district.

## **Teachers want input**

Judy Wallis, language arts director in the Spring Branch district, said she's worried about whether the board will have time to take teachers' concerns into account.

"Always, the concern is (that) anytime you truncate something, you run the risk of compromising it," Wallis said. "That's the biggest concern we have right now as educators: Will we have the thoughtful kind of document that can guide instruction or will we have a document that we rushed to finish?"

TEA officials said the official public comment period on the document will be in March and April. They vowed to listen.

"The schedule was carefully constructed to make sure there would be adequate time," said Monica Martinez, TEA curriculum director. "There isn't a lot of time, but there's time."

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