

States face challenges to improve writing standards

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Far too many K-12 students have inadequate writing skills, and the current efforts to improve instruction in the United States may be more challenging than anticipated, research from Michigan State University shows.

According to an initial sample of seven [states](#), the existing standards for teaching [writing](#) vary widely in comparison to a new set of common standards that are in the process of being implemented by most states.

Study co-director Gary Troia of MSU, along with Natalie Olinghouse at the University of Connecticut, said educators and [policymakers](#) in many parts of the country will have to make significant changes to bring existing curriculum, materials and teacher training in line with the Common Core State Standards for writing and language.

The new K-12 standards are intended to improve instruction in mathematics and English language arts, including writing, nationwide.

"Everyone needs to know how to write well, and we are not doing a good enough job to prepare students," said Troia, associate professor of education. "What we are finding is that states are going to be faced with a misalignment between the content standards and curriculum materials they are using and what the Common Core requires them to cover."

The research team has a \$1.6 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to study writing standards, assessments and [student](#)

[performance](#) in all states except Maryland, Texas and the District of Columbia, which elected not to participate. Their first findings, presented at the American Educational Research Association meeting April 17, reflect an analysis of states representing a range of demographics and writing test results: California, Arizona, Kansas, Kentucky, Florida, New York and Massachusetts.

The researchers also evaluated the scope and quality of the Common Core writing standards, expected to be implemented in 46 states by 2014. They found the common standards are easy to interpret, succinct and balanced in terms of covering content across grades and topic areas. However, some important aspects of writing, such as student motivation, peer and teacher feedback, and mastery of an expanded range of writing purposes, are not included in the Common Core.

"Things that do matter at an early age like spelling and handwriting are not addressed very well," said Troia. "States have to think about whether they want to add anything to the common standards as opposed to implementing them as is."

Policy research has shown that content standards affect what is taught and how students perform. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, up to two-thirds of U.S. students are not considered proficient in writing.

"That presents a pretty bleak picture, and yet the expectations for writing in college and the workplace are being ramped up," Troia said. "The Common Core can provide consistency and a lot of opportunities to enhance instruction, but there are gaps as well and we don't want those to be ignored."

The four-year study also is exploring how states' writing [standards](#) and assessments reflect research knowledge about best practices as well as

the types of writing skills students are expected to demonstrate after graduation.

Provided by Michigan State University

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