

New approach urged for 'abysmal' K-12 writing instruction

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Michigan State University education professor Gary Troia calls for a fresh approach to professional development for teachers who must help students meet the new Common Core writing standards. Credit: Michigan State University

Writing instruction in U.S. classrooms is "abysmal" and the Common Core State Standards don't go far enough to address glaring gaps for students and teachers, a Michigan State University education scholar argues.

In a new study, Gary Troia calls for a fresh approach to [professional development](#) for teachers who must help [students](#) meet the new [writing standards](#). His research, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, appears in the journal *School Psychology Review*.

"We need to re-orient the way we think about teacher professional development," said Troia, associate professor in MSU's College of Education. "We need to be smarter about professional development and make sure it's comprehensive, sustained and focused on the needs in the classroom."

The Common Core standards aim to improve U.S. student performance in mathematics and English language arts, which include writing. The standards have been adopted by 45 states and are in various phases of being rolled out for implementation.

While the standards are strong in some areas of [writing instruction](#), they are weak in many others, Troia said. For example, spelling and handwriting are not addressed comprehensively in early grades. Keyboarding is a focus only in grades 3 through 6, even though computers have become increasingly important throughout [school](#) and new assessments aligned with the Common Core will use computers. And the standards don't reinforce teaching of some writing genres useful in civic life and personal growth.

The stakes are high, Troia said, as only about a quarter of U.S. students are performing at a proficient level in writing.

"Federal efforts and research dollars tend to focus on reading, math and science, while writing is often left out in the cold," Troia said. "We're trying to point out that writing is really important and that we should focus more on writing so it's no longer the neglected 'R'."

Troia was referring to a groundbreaking 2003 report by the National Commission on Writing which argues that writing instruction has been shortchanged in K-12 schools and colleges and universities. Not much has changed since that report was released a decade ago, he said.

"When you look at writing instruction in the K-12 classroom, it's still pretty abysmal," he said. "Teachers are generally not adapting instruction for struggling writers and most students struggle with writing if you look at national test scores."

The Common Core was not designed to tell teachers how to help students meet its writing standards, Troia noted. Still, because many of the writing [standards](#) are new for most states – or uncovered in current professional development – classroom teachers will need to consult other educators and resources to acquire the needed knowledge, he said.

Troia recommends classroom teachers get help from school personnel who are familiar with research and research-based writing instruction and assessment practices such as special educators, school psychologists and speech-language pathologists.

"School psychologists and others can function as a valuable resource for [teachers](#) and schools in their efforts to deploy evidence-based practices, especially for students who struggle with writing," Troia said.

Natalie Olinghouse from the University of Connecticut co-authored the study.

Provided by Michigan State University

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