



A systematic comparison of the American Diploma Project English language arts college readiness standards with those of the ACT, College Board, and Standards for Success





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Summary

**February 2010**

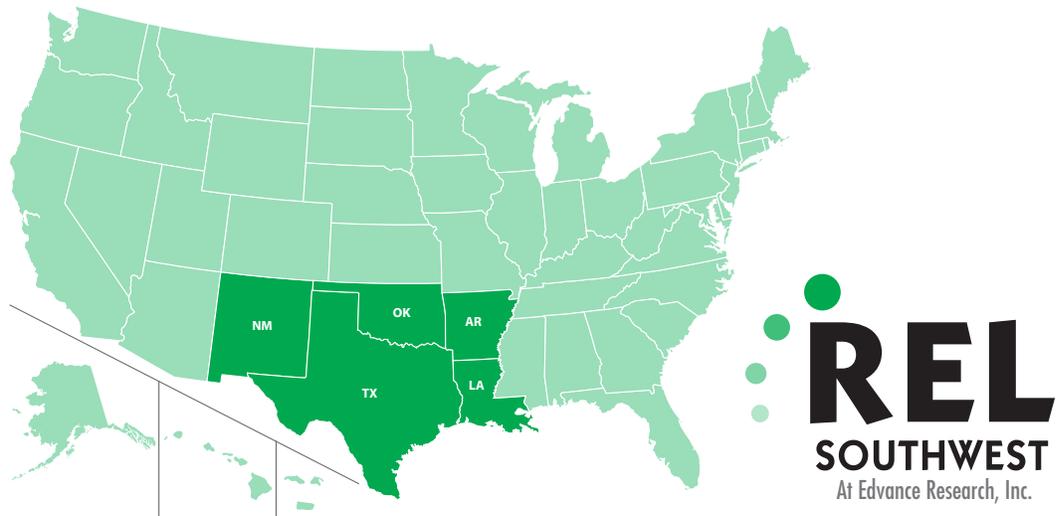
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# A systematic comparison of the American Diploma Project English language arts college readiness standards with those of the ACT, College Board, and Standards for Success

**This study of four national English language arts college readiness standards sets compares content alignment and level of alignment of the standards statements in three comparison sets to a benchmark set, the American Diploma Project (ADP), and analyzes the cognitive complexity of all four sets. Standards statements in the comparison sets align completely or partially to varying proportions of the ADP benchmark’s 62 standards statements—77 percent for the College Board College Readiness Standards, 68 percent for Standards for Success, and 34 percent for the ACT College Readiness Standards. But only 5 percent of the ADP statements completely align with content in all three comparison sets, a share that rises to 27 percent when partial alignment is also considered. A majority of statements in the four sets (53–68 percent) were rated level 3 on a four-level cognitive complexity scale.**

The country’s interest in college readiness has intensified in recent years. Four sets of English language arts college readiness standards—content statements specifying what students

should know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level college courses—intended for national use have been developed in the past decade. This report details an independent comparison of these four standards sets using the American Diploma Project (ADP; Achieve, Inc. 2004) standards set as the benchmark and the other three as comparison sets.

The Commission for a College Ready Texas (2007), which was guiding the development of college readiness standards, requested technical assistance from Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest for a comparison of English language arts college readiness definitions in the four standards sets. No previous independent comparisons had been identified. Once this study was complete, members of the REL Southwest Governing Board saw the technical assistance as relevant to college readiness standards work being conducted in other states in the Southwest Region that had not gone through a process of internally developing and formally adopting their own college readiness standards.

The board requested that the study be replicated using a more rigorous methodology so that the results could inform policymakers, curriculum

experts, standards-writing and review teams, and state assessment writing teams about similarities and differences in content and cognitive complexity between the ADP standards and each of the three comparison sets of college readiness standards for English language arts: the ACT College Readiness Standards (ACT; ACT, Inc. 2007), College Board College Readiness Standards (College Board 2006), and Standards for Success (S4S; Conley 2003).

Building on the initial technical assistance work, this two-part study includes a systematic examination of the content of the standards statements (the knowledge and skills explicitly stated or strongly implied) and an analysis of their cognitive complexity (the level of reasoning, cognitive demand, or depth of knowledge required to demonstrate mastery of the contents of a standards statement). ADP was again selected as the benchmark because the ADP standards set includes statements that represent the content deemed necessary by college readiness standards experts at a level of detail that is easily communicated to both policymakers and content experts (not too specific or too broad), because 35 states are part of the ADP network, and because several Texas policymakers were involved in developing the ADP standards. While ADP was thus considered the most appropriate choice for the benchmark in this study, any standards set could have been used as the benchmark, and ADP's selection does not imply superiority.

The report addresses two primary research questions:

- For what percentage of content statements in the American Diploma Project college readiness standards set (the benchmark) is there a completely or partially aligned content statement in each of the other three sets of comparison standards (ACT, College Board, Standards for Success)?
- For each standards set what is the distribution of content statements across the four levels of a cognitive complexity (cognitive demand) scale?

Alignment of the standards statements in each of the three comparison sets to the ADP standards statements was established by systematically comparing individual standards statements to determine whether content was shared (content alignment) and, if so, at what level (using a three-level content alignment rating scale—complete, partial, no alignment). The cognitive demand expected of students in each college readiness standards statement also was rated using Webb's (2002) four-level depth of knowledge (DoK) scale, which is typically used to evaluate the cognitive complexity alignment of test items to standards (Rothman 2004).

Among the study findings, four stand out. First, the percentage of ADP's 62 standards statements that align with standards statements in each of the comparison sets varies, from 77 percent completely or partially aligned statements in College Board to 68 percent in S4S, and 34 percent in ACT. Second, only 5 percent of ADP standards statements (3 of 62) completely align with content included in all three comparison sets. When partial alignment is also considered, the content shared by all four sets of standards rises to 27 percent (17 of the 62 ADP statements). Third, each set of standards contains content that does not align to ADP content—51 percent of

ACT statements, 30 percent of College Board statements, and 15 percent of S4S statements. Fourth, all four levels of the DoK scale are represented in each of the college readiness standards sets, although more than half the statements in each set of standards are written at level 3—strategic thinking, which requires students to demonstrate reasoning, planning skills, and the ability to make complex inferences. State standards and assessments at cognitive complexity levels 1 and 2 may therefore not reflect the level of demand intended by many college readiness standards.

The study has several limitations. Only one set of college readiness standards (ADP) was used as the benchmark, so a direct analysis of the content alignment between ACT, College Board, and S4S was not done. The standards sets align only on general content and cognitive complexity, not on other potentially useful dimensions—such as breadth, depth, and

specificity—that would provide additional content detail that state standards writing teams or assessment writing teams might find useful. No statement can be made about the superiority of one set of standards over another or about the degree to which mastery of the skills defined by the standards is associated with success in college (with the exception of ACT<sup>1</sup>). In addition, the manner in which the terms *complete alignment*, *partial alignment*, and *no alignment* were defined and interpreted, and the subjectivity inherent in assigning ratings (an issue for all alignment studies), could have affected the findings.

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Note

1. The link between high ACT scores, first-year college success, and specific standards mastery has been established (ACT, Inc. 2007).