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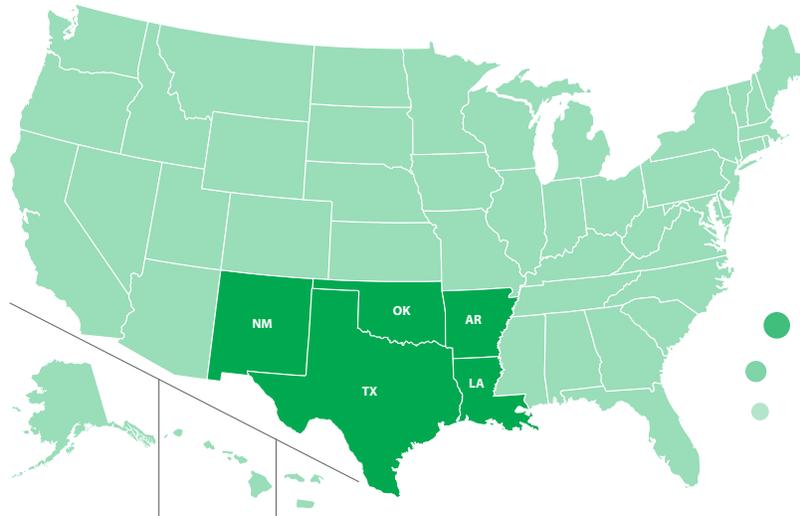
Summary

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Issues & Answers is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on current education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change to reflect new issues, as identified through lab outreach and requests for assistance from policymakers and educators at state and local levels and from communities, businesses, parents, families, and youth. All Issues & Answers reports meet Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research.

Are Texas' English language arts and reading standards college ready?

This study compares alignment of the ACT and the American Diploma Project (ADP) national college readiness standards sets with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English language arts and reading (TEKS ELAR) standards for grades 9–12 and analyzes their cognitive complexity. It finds that a majority of the content in the ACT and ADP standards sets is addressed to some extent by the TEKS ELAR standards and that the TEKS ELAR standards demand higher levels of cognitive complexity than do the other two standards sets.

College readiness has recently emerged as a national issue, driven in part by repeated findings that many first-year college students are required to take remedial courses (for example, Provasnik and Planty 2008; Terry 2007). In response, several sets of national college readiness standards (content statements that define what students should know in specific areas) have been developed, such as the ACT College Readiness Standards (ACT, Inc. 2007) and the American Diploma Project (ADP) College and Workplace Readiness Benchmarks (Achieve, Inc. 2004). An emphasis on college readiness standards is also evident in the distribution of American Reinvestment and Recovery Act education funds (U.S. Department of Education 2009) and in the 2009 Common

Core State Standards Initiative, sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, which is developing a national set of K–12 English language arts and mathematics standards that includes college readiness standards (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2009; South Carolina Department of Education 2009).

Although Texas has not participated in this national initiative, recent state legislation has focused on developing college readiness standards, vertically aligning the state's K–12 curriculum to those standards through a logical progression for teaching content in a subject area across grades, and raising state standards for student performance to move Texas into the top 10 states in college readiness by 2019/20 (Texas Legislature 2006, 2009). Thus, state leaders need to understand how the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards for grades 9–12 relate to college readiness expectations. To support this work, an alignment study was requested comparing the 2008 TEKS English language arts and reading (TEKS ELAR) standards (Texas Education Agency 2008) and two national English language arts college readiness standards sets, ACT and ADP.

The study assessed alignment on two dimensions: content (the knowledge and skills

represented by a standards statement) and cognitive complexity (the level of reasoning or cognitive demand on students represented by a standards statement). Two questions were examined:

- What percentage of content statements in the ACT and American Diploma Project (ADP) college readiness standards sets (the benchmark sets) align fully or partially with content statements in the 2008 Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English language arts and reading (TEKS ELAR) grade 9–12 standards set (the comparison set)?

- For each of these standards sets, what is the distribution of content statements across the four levels of a cognitive complexity (cognitive demand) scale?

On content alignment, the study finds that a majority of content in the ACT and ADP college readiness standards sets is addressed to some extent by the TEKS ELAR standards. Specifically,

- Fourteen percent of ACT statements fully align and 75 percent partially align with TEKS ELAR statements.

- Forty-eight percent of ADP statements fully align and 45 percent partially align with TEKS ELAR statements.

- The proportion of ACT statements that fully align with TEKS ELAR statements varies across ACT content strands from 5 percent to 29 percent, and the proportion that partially aligns varies from 55 percent to 89 percent.

- The proportion of ADP statements that fully align with TEKS ELAR statements varies across ADP content strands from 0 percent to 67 percent, and the proportion that partially aligns varies from 22 percent to 75 percent.

These results are difficult to interpret in isolation, as there are no universally accepted criteria for determining good or poor levels of alignment. Reporting the findings in relation to another standards-to-standards alignment study (Rolfhus et al. 2010) can provide context for interpreting the findings. Of five pairwise comparisons (three in Rolfhus et al. and two in the current study), the ADP–TEKS comparison in the current study has the highest percentage of both fully aligned content and combined fully and partially aligned content. The ACT–TEKS comparison in the current study ranks fourth in fully aligned content and second in combined fully and partially aligned content. These two studies indicate that TEKS ELAR aligns more closely to ADP than any of the other three national English language arts college readiness standards examined.

The TEKS ELAR statements demand higher levels of cognitive complexity than both benchmark college readiness standards sets examined in this study and the two additional standards sets (College Board, Standards for Success) examined in Rolfhus et al. (2010). In the current study, the ADP and TEKS ELAR standards sets exhibit the most similarities. Other notable findings:

- Each of the four levels of cognitive complexity (recall, skill/concept, strategic thinking, and extended thinking) was represented in each of the standards sets.