

# Colorado Academic Standards: ELA / Literacy Benchmarking Report Summary



**COLORADO**  
Department of Education

## Introduction

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The Colorado Department of Education is committed to providing rigorous academic standards of the highest quality. In preparation for the standards review and revise process, the CDE requested that Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation (CSAI) staff design and conduct an evaluation of the current Colorado Academic Standards (CAS) in relation to selected external referent standards, in order to determine how and to what degree Colorado's current standards compare with other state standards, with national standards, and with international standards; to inform the CDE regarding alignment or gaps between the CAS and these external referents; and to provide guidance to Standards Review Committees in their work.

### **Methodology** (pp. 5-10)\*

**Alignment Review Criteria:** The general criteria were depth and breadth, coherence, and rigor; specific criteria are described in greater detail in the following bulleted list. These criteria were used to ensure that the information in the findings would be appropriate for Colorado's context and, thus, maximally useful to the state. The composition for the criteria were designed as holistic questions of sufficiency and appropriateness that were applied by analysts as they conducted their review.

- **Depth and Breadth:** Do the CAS GLE and EO statements describe sufficient and appropriate depth and breadth of content within each standard, with respect to comparable statements from the CCSS? If not, what content is missing? Are the GLE and EO statements free from extraneous content? If not, what content is extraneous?
- **Coherence:** Are the CAS GLE and EO statements for each standard sequenced appropriately, with respect to comparable statements from the CCSS? Do the GLE and EO statements for each standard begin and end at appropriate points in the content?
- **Rigor:** Do the CAS GLE and EO statements describe content and skill expectations of a reasonable and appropriate level for the given grade, with respect to comparable statements from the selected external referents? Do the CAS GLE and EO statements communicate an appropriate level of rigor?

**External Referent Standards.** The CDE selected the external referent standards to which the CAS would be compared in this step. Included in the selection criteria was whether the standards were from states or countries identified as having strong overall academic performance and quality of their standards. To enable maximal usefulness in guiding standards revisions, sets of standards were sought that would be relevant in many content areas. Additionally, it was thought that by including a review of each set of external referent standards for multiple content areas, the comparison would benefit from identification of cross-content elements or guiding philosophies that might not be apparent in any one content area. To this end, they selected the following sets of standards from the following entities:

- Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL), and
- Singapore's English Language Syllabi.

**Criteria Used for Comparative Analyses.** The external referent comparison was intended to serve as a holistic review of the similarities and differences between the CAS, in their current forms, and each external referent, as compared to similar analyses completed prior to the last revisions of the CAS. Specifically, comparisons were documented in terms of two criteria: organization/structure and content. CSAI staff's considerations for judging each are defined as follows:

\* Page numbers refer to the page(s) in the full benchmarking report.



- **Organization/Structure:** Considerations related to standards organization and structure included similarities and differences in grade articulation (standards articulated by individual grade, grade span, course, etc.; cross-grade strands versus no repetition of content), hierarchy of standards (number of levels in standards—e.g., strand, standard, benchmark, indicator), number of standards (numbers of strands, standards, and indicators), design/format, and ways in which intended knowledge and skills are communicated.
- **Content:** CSAI staff considerations related to standards content included similarities and differences in scope and sequence (depth and breadth of content described in the standards), grade spans (sequencing and distribution of content within and across the grade spans), and wording (specificity of language; focus on action verbs, knowledge, etc.) of the standards.

## Findings & Recommendations

### ***Alignment Review Findings***

This section contains findings related to the alignment review of the CAS in relation to the CCSS. Detailed review criteria can be found in the Methodology section of this report. As described in that section, the CAS GLE and EO statements were reviewed for their quality, according to three specific criteria (depth and breadth, coherence, and rigor), in relation to comparable statements provided in national standards (CCSS). The scale used for evaluating each criterion was as follows: Fully (F), Partially (P), or No (N). Please note that tables vary in the grade levels that are included and have been constructed to facilitate explanations for areas where there were increased levels of partial and/or no alignment. As much as possible grade levels have been grouped by traditional grade spans (K– 2, 3 – 5, 6 – 8, 9 – 12).

As CCSS ELA and mathematics standards do not exist for preschool, CAS for preschool were omitted from analysis.

### **Alignment Review—Colorado Reading, Writing, and Communicating Standards**

#### ***Depth and Breadth.***

- Overall, 87 percent of Colorado’s RWC standards are aligned with the CCSS ELA in terms of depth and breadth, with 75 percent of these standards fully aligned. This strong alignment is particularly evident in the elementary-grade standards (grades K–5). For standards in each of these grades, the level of full alignment to CCSS ELA depth and breadth is at least 80 percent.
- Alignment between the Colorado RWC and the CCSS ELA for high school is also not as strong as the alignment of the K–5 standards. For grades 9 and 12, less than half of the Colorado RWC standards are fully aligned to CCSS ELA for the same grade, in terms of depth and breadth.
- Colorado RWC standards for kindergarten and first grade were largely consistent with the content of the CCSS at those grade levels, while more departures from the CCSS ELA were introduced in the Colorado RWC second-grade standards. These departures were most evident in the Writing and Composition strand, which included a number of standards that had no direct counterpart in the grade 2 CCSS ELA
- The higher percentage of Partial alignment decisions at third grade is mainly attributable to Research and Reasoning standards that depart somewhat from the content of the CCSS ELA.
- The large percentage of No alignment decisions at sixth grade is attributable in part to that grade level’s substantial number of standards (7) in the Research and Reasoning strand that deal with intellectual orientation and attitudes, which have no counterpart in the CCSS ELA.
- The relatively high number of Partial and No alignment decisions for depth and breadth at grades 9-12 are partly attributable to the inclusion of standards that cannot be found in the CCCSS ELA, particularly under the Research and Reasoning and Oral Expression and Listening strands. Another contributing factor is that the CCSS ELA has standards for grade bands in high school (9-10 and 11-12), but the Colorado RWC standards are individuated at



each grade. In order to do this, Colorado RWC divides the standards between the two grades in each span, which results in only some of the standards applying at particular grades.

### ***Coherence.***

- Across all grades, 89 percent of Colorado RWC standards are aligned to the CCSS ELA, with 79 percent of those standards fully aligned. RWC standards in grades K–6 were found to have the highest levels of alignment to the CCSS ELA, with at least 80 percent of the RWC standards in each of those grades fully aligned with CCSS ELA.
- The weakest alignment in terms of coherence was observed for grade 9, with only 49 percent of Colorado RWC standards fully aligned with CCSS ELA.
- The higher percentage of Partial alignment decisions for coherence at third grade is attributable to the fact that a relatively larger number of Colorado RWC third-grade standards introduced material that is covered in the CCSS ELA at other (usually higher) grade levels. The higher percentages of No alignment decisions for coherence at fourth and fifth grades are attributable to the fact that more standards at these grade levels address material that is not present in the CCSS ELA. This material primarily occurs in the Colorado RWC standards in the Research and Reasoning strand that pertain to intellectual orientation and attitudes: relative to third grade, fourth and fifth grade each contain an additional standard of this nature.
- As was the case with the ratings for depth and breadth, the large percentage of No alignment decisions at sixth grade is attributable in part to that grade level’s substantial number of standards (7) in the Research and Reasoning strand that deal with intellectual orientation and attitudes, which have no counterpart in the CCSS ELA. In addition, some sixth-grade Colorado RWC standards in the Writing and Composition strand address content that is not present in the CCSS ELA. The relatively high number of Partial and No alignment decisions for coherence at grades 7 and 8 are mainly attributable to the inclusion of standards that cannot be found in the CCSS ELA, particularly under the Research and Reasoning and Oral Expression and Listening strands.
- The relatively high number of Partial and No alignment decisions for coherence at grades 9-12 are partly attributable to the inclusion of standards that cannot be found in the CCSS, particularly under the Research and Reasoning and Oral Expression and Listening strands. Another contributing factor is that the CCSS ELA has standards for grade bands in high school (9-10 and 11-12), but the Colorado RWC standards are individuated at each grade. In order to do this, Colorado RWC divides the standards between the two grades in each span, which results in only some of the standards applying at particular grades. This approach has a noted effect on coherence. Since the CCSS ELA makes little differentiation within each span (only at reading standard 10, which addresses text complexity), it must be assumed that all applicable standards are required of all students in both grades of the span.

### ***Rigor.***

- Across all grade levels, 89 percent of Colorado RWC standards are aligned to the CCSS ELA, with 76 percent of Colorado RWC fully aligned. Alignment in terms of rigor was strongest among the standards for grades K–5, with at least 86 percent of Colorado RWC standards in each of those grades in full alignment with the CCSS ELA.
- Full alignment in terms of rigor is weaker for standards in grades 9 and 12, with full alignment below 50 percent for both grades.
- The higher percentages of No alignment decisions for rigor at fourth and fifth grades are attributable to the fact that more standards at these grade levels address material that is not present in the CCSS ELA. This material primarily occurs in the Colorado RWC standards in the Research and Reasoning strand that pertain to intellectual orientation and attitudes: relative to third grade, fourth and fifth grade each contain an additional standard of this nature.
- As was the case with the ratings for depth and breadth and for coherence, the large percentage of No alignment decisions at sixth grade is attributable in part to that grade level’s substantial number of standards (7) in the Research and Reasoning strand that deal with intellectual orientation and attitudes, which have no counterpart



in the CCSS ELA. In addition, some sixth-grade Colorado RWC standards in the Writing and Composition strand address content that is not present in the CCSS ELA. The relatively high number of Partial and No alignment decisions for rigor at grades 7 and 8 are partly attributable to the inclusion of standards that cannot be found in the CCSS ELA, particularly under the Research and Reasoning and Oral Expression and Listening strands.

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### **External Referent Standards.**

#### **Organization/Structure—Reading, Writing, and Communicating**

**Virginia.** Both Virginia and Colorado specify individual standards by grade level. Like Colorado’s standards, Virginia’s standards increase in complexity as grades increase, which assumes student mastery of earlier skills. Both sets of state standards also organize content into similar topical or thematic strands.

**Singapore.** With regard to Singapore’s English Language Syllabi, analysts found differences from the Colorado RWC standards in organization and structure. Singapore’s syllabi include standards that apply to all grade levels from Primary (grades 1–6) through Secondary (1N–5N, 1E–4E). These grade ranges are roughly equivalent to grades 1–11, though the Secondary standards are tracked into either Normal or Express levels, which differs from the structure of Colorado’s standards. Singapore has standards that are added as grade levels increase, but states that standards from lower grades still be required at all subsequent grade levels. Like Colorado, Singapore organizes content into topical or thematic strands, but the structure of the syllabi includes differences in focus. Overall, Singapore’s standards emphasize an accumulation of skills, which differs from Colorado’s emphasis on scaffolding of skills.

#### **Content—Reading, Writing, and Communicating**

**Virginia.** Both Colorado and Virginia specify standards at each grade level. The organization of content is very similar between Colorado and Virginia. Both sets of standards include four basic, roughly similar strands: strands for speaking and listening, reading, writing, and research. However, the strands in each state may vary slightly in focus as well as at which grade level they are introduced. For example, Virginia introduces research at a higher grade level (fourth grade) than Colorado does, and Virginia introduces media literacy into its speaking and listening strand in fourth grade.

Although some strand names vary slightly between the two states, such as Oral Language in Virginia versus Oral Expression and Listening in Colorado, the skills described by the standards in these strands are roughly comparable. In addition to the aforementioned differences in grades at which certain strands are introduced, the states’ standards also notably differ in terms of which skills they incorporate into the basic strand.

The Colorado and Virginia reading and writing standards have a generally similar focus. Overall, there are more similarities than differences between the content of the Virginia and Colorado standards.

**Singapore.** Singapore’s English Language Syllabus 2010 includes extensive introductory materials that describe the genesis of the standards, the philosophy behind them, and the aims of the standards, as well as providing detailed explanations of how to read the table format that is used to present the standards. Similar introductions are included at the beginning of each strand, serving as a general explanation of the standards, as opposed to the standard-specific information contained in Colorado’s 21st Century Skills and Readiness Competencies.

Singapore is different from Colorado in how standards are applied to different grade levels. Singapore’s chart format is used to indicate the grade level at which standards are introduced, as well as to show that standards continue to be



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applicable to subsequent grades. The strands for each set of standards are as follows:

Although there are some similarities between Singapore's and Colorado's strands, there are also notable differences. The two sets of standards use some of the same basic strands: both include strands for speaking, listening, reading, and writing. However, Singapore separates speaking and listening into separate strands; adds strands for grammar and vocabulary; and places emphasis on viewing live and multimedia stimuli and on nonverbal representation of ideas. Nonverbal communication is a component of Colorado's standards, but it is not an overarching focus at the strand level, as it is in Singapore's. Another notable difference is the absence of a research strand in the Singapore standards. These variations indicate significant differences in focus between the Colorado and Singapore standards.

At the standard level, while there are many similarities between Colorado and Singapore in terms of content, more differences than similarities can be seen between the two. The Singapore standards, in general, tend to emphasize a more utilitarian approach toward language usage and communication. The Singapore standards tend to break skills down into more granular components than the Colorado standards. However, Singapore's syllabi do not include any interpretation or application information for individual standards.

*(Note: The standards revision committee will have a version of this document which includes WestEd's analysis of Evidence Outcomes by grade level.)*