Chapter 1

Setting Standards
in the English Language Arts

This document describes standards for the English language arts—that is, it defines what students should know about language and be able to do with language. Our goal is to define, as clearly and specifically as possible, the current consensus among literacy teachers and researchers about what students should learn in the English language arts—reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing. The ultimate purpose of these standards is to ensure that *all* students are offered the opportunities, the encouragement, and the vision to develop the language skills they need to pursue life's goals, including personal enrichment and participation as informed members of our society.

Over the past several years, national educational organizations have launched a series of ambitious projects to define voluntary standards for science, mathematics, art, music, foreign languages, social studies, English language arts, and other subjects. These efforts have served as catalysts in a wide-ranging national conversation about the needs of students and the instructional approaches of their teachers. This dialogue is healthy and speaks well of the value placed on education by the American public.

This document adds to the national dialogue by presenting the consensus that exists among thousands of English language arts educators about what all students in K-12 schools should know and be able to do with language, in all its forms. We believe that the act of defining standards is worthwhile because it invites further reflection and conversation about the fundamental goals of public schooling.

Defining the Standards

Based on extensive discussions among educators across the country about the central aims of English language arts instruction, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English have defined a set of content standards for the English language arts. By the term *content standards,* we mean statements that define what students should know and be able to do in the English language arts. Although the standards focus primarily on content, we also underscore the importance of other dimensions of language learning. In particular, we believe that questions of why, when, and how students grow and develop as language users are also critical and must be addressed by those who translate the standards into practice. As we discuss in Chapter 2, the perspective informing the standards captures the interaction among these aspects of language learning—content, purpose, development, and context—and emphasizes the central role of the learner, whose goals and interests drive the processes of learning.

In defining the standards, we use some terms that have multiple meanings. Briefly we use the term *text* broadly to refer not only to printed texts, but also to spoken language, graphics, and technological communications. *Language* as it is used here encompasses visual communication in addition to spoken and written forms of expression. And *reading* refers to listening and viewing in addition to print-oriented reading. (See the Glossary for additional terms.)

It is important to emphasize from the outset that these standards are intended to serve as guidelines that provide ample room for the kinds of innovation and creativity that are essential to teaching and learning. They are not meant to be seen as prescriptions for particular curricula or instructional approaches.

We must also stress that although a list implies that the individual entries are distinct and clearly separable, the realities of language learning are far more complex. Each of these standards is tied to the others in obvious and subtle ways, and considerable overlap exists among them. Thus, while we identify discrete standards for purposes of discussion and elaboration, and to provide a curricular focus, we recognize the complex interactions that exist among the individual entries and urge our readers to do the same.

Subsequent chapters of this document explore a model of language learning that provides a perspective for standards (Chapter 2); elaborate on the standards (Chapter 3); and consider some of the ways in which the standards are realized in the classroom (Chapter 4). Before turning to these discussions, however, we wish to take a closer look at the rationale for setting standards—why we believe defining standards is important and what we hope to accomplish in doing so.

The Need for Standards

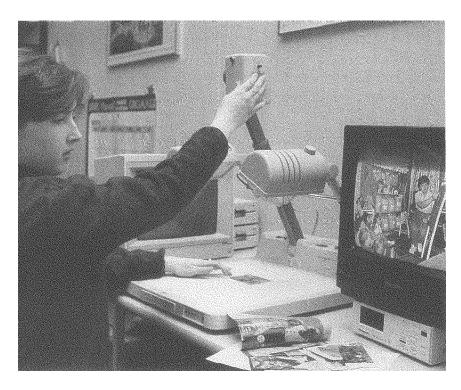In defining standards for the English language arts, we are motivated by three core beliefs:

- First, we believe that standards are needed to prepare students for the literacy requirements of the future as well as the present. Changes in technology and society have altered and will continue to alter the ways in which we use language to communicate and to think. Students must be prepared to meet these demands.

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The vision guiding these standards is that all students must have the opportunities and resources to develop the language skills they need to pursue life's goals and to participate fully as informed, productive members of society. These standards assume that literacy growth begins before children enter school as they experience experiment with literacy activities—reading and writing , and associating spoken words with their graphic representations. recognizing this fact, these standards encourage the development of curriculum and instruction that make productive use of the emerging literacy abilities that children bring to school. Furthermore, the standards provide ample room for the innovation and creativity essential to teaching and learning. They are not prescriptions for particular curriculum or instruction.

Although we present these standards as a list, we want to emphasize that they are not distinct and separable; they are, in fact. interrelated and should be considered as a whole.

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style. vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written. and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

- Second, we believe that standards can articulate a shared vision of what the nation's teachers, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and others expect students to attain in the English language arts, and what we can do to ensure that this vision is realized.
- Third, we believe that standards are necessary to promote high educational expectations for all students and to bridge the documented disparities that exist in educational opportunities. Standards can help us ensure that all students become informed citizens and participate fully in society.

To Prepare Students for the Literacy Demands of Today and Tomorrow

The standards outlined in this document reflect a view of literacy that is both broader and more demanding than traditional definitions. For many years, literacy was defined in a very limited way—as the ability to read or write one's own name, for example (Soltow and Stevens 1981). A much more ambitious definition of literacy today includes the capacity to accomplish a wide range of reading, writing, and other language tasks associated with everyday life. The National Literacy Act of 1991, for example, defines literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."
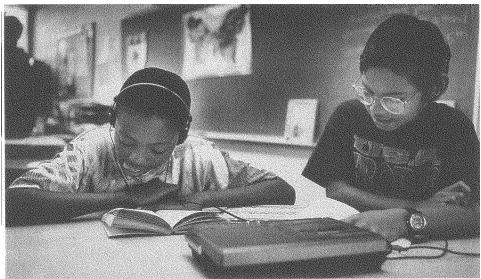
This historical perspective provides a context for interpreting current perspectives on English language arts education. For example, critics argue that fewer and fewer students are able to read and write well, blaming schools and teachers for failing to fulfill their responsibilities. In actuality, however, ever-increasing numbers of high school graduates have met our past goals in literacy (see sidebar). The mismatch that currently exists is between students' achievements and our expanded expectation for their literacy.

We see the need for change, but this need derives from a vision of a more challenging future rather than a criticism of past or current efforts. We believe that schools and teachers deserve praise for the encouraging results they are achieving. This does not mean, however, that all

students today leave school with every skill they need to become critically literate citizens, workers, members of society, and lifelong learners. Indeed, we face new demands, new standards of critical thinking and expressive ability, that we are now beginning to meet.

Literacy expectations are likely to accelerate in the coming decades. To participate fully in society and the workplace in 2020, citizens will need powerful literacy abilities that until now have been achieved by only a small percentage of the population. At the same time, individuals will need to develop technological competencies undreamed of as recently as ten years ago. One unexpected outcome of the recent explosion in electronic media has been a remarkable increase in the use of written language, suggesting that predictions about the decline of conventional literacy have been misplaced and premature. Electronic mail, similarly, has fundamentally altered personal written correspondence, and growing access to the Internet will continue to increase the demand for citizens who can read and write using electronic media. Furthermore, reading and writing are essential skills in planning and producing nonprint media.

This broadened definition of literacy means that English language arts education must address many different types and uses of language, including those that are often given limited attention in the curriculum. One such area is spoken language. We have learned to respect the continuing importance of oral culture in all communities and to recognize the rich interdependence between spoken and written language. Much of our knowledge of language and our acquisition of literacy depends on spoken language. Any definition of the English language arts must therefore include helping students learn how to accomplish successfully the many functions of spoken language, such as discussing texts, making presentations, assisting visitors, or telling stories to family and friends.

Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts such as illustrations, charts, graphs, electronic displays, photographs, film, and video is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum. Visual communication is part of the fabric of contemporary life. Although many parents and teachers worry that television, film, and video have displaced reading and encouraged students to be passive, unreflective, and uninvolved, we cannot erase visual texts from modern life even if we want to. We must therefore challenge students to analyze critically the texts they view and to integrate their visual knowledge with their knowledge of other forms of language. By studying how visual texts work, students learn to employ visual media as another powerful means of communication.

Three sources of data indicate that. contrary to popular belief. reading and writing abilities have not declined over time: "then crud now" studies, test restandardization research, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress surreys of reading and writing.

By readministering; the same test off'e'r Mile, "then and now" Studies examine trends in student achievement based on past standards of lit-eracy. Of the several dozen studies of this nature, all but one conclude that more recent students outperform earlier students (Farr, Tuinman, and Rows 19%4). The exception was found in a study comparing the skills of pre-1930 students and post-1935 students in oral reading an area that was de-emphasized in the reading curriculum in the early 19,3 0s.

When test publishers revise (or restandardize") an aging lest, they administer both old and new versions to a sample of current students. A review of test restandardization reports indicates that, since the mid-1970s, scores have increased by about 2 percentile points per year for five of the six most widely used achievement tests in grades I through 9. Changes in scores at the high school level have been mixed, with scores increasing slightly on some tests and decreasing slightly on others (Berliner and Biddle 1995, Lion. Grace. and Sanders 1990; Kibby1993, 2095: Stedman and Kaestle)1987).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) conducts periodic assessments of reading. writing, and other subject areas with nationally representative samples of 9-. 13-, and 17-year-olds. Since 1971, there has been a statistically significant increase in reading scores among 13- and 17-year-olds (Mullis, Campbell and Farstrup 1993).

Thus, evidence suggests that students today read hell( )' and write better than at any other time in the history of the country (Kibby 1993. 1995).

Based on this expanded definition of literacy, the standards outlined in this document address six English language arts: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing. These six areas are notably different from one another, but there are also important connections among them, and these connections are central to English language arts instruction and learning. One familiar way to link the language arts, for example, is to pair them by medium: reading and writing involve written language, listening and speaking involve spoken communication, and viewing and visually representing involve visual language.

There are many other important interconnections among the English language arts, as well. Learners' repertoires of words, images, and concepts grow as they read, listen, and view; new words, images, and concepts then become part of their written, spoken, and visual language systems. We know, for example, that in the early stages of reading, the act of writing helps to shape children's understanding of texts. Children use a number of strategies for writing. Sometimes they read the stories they have composed to classmates to get feedback on what is working well in their stories and what needs clarifying. Sometimes they spell a word the way it

sounds (that is, applying their knowledge of phonics), while at other times they spell a word the way they recall seeing it. These writing/spelling strategies draw children's attention to the conventions of print, enabling them to begin to read like writers.

Thus, English language arts learning activities are seldom wholly discrete—"just reading," "just writing," or "just viewing," for example. Each medium relates directly or indirectly to every other.

To Present a Shared Vision of Literacy Education

Clearly defined standards offer a vision of the knowledge and strategies that all students should develop in the English language arts, as well as of the curricular and instructional elements that can be used to foster this development. To achieve these standards, this vision must be shared by all those who have a stake in the future of our schools—not just the English language arts teachers who are directly responsible for providing instruction, but also school administrators, policymakers, parents, and members of the general public. A shared vision means that different parties know what the work of the classroom is and should be, and have a clear sense of what they can do to support this work. Public commitments to education may depend upon this shared vision.

A shared vision does not, of course, imply a single approach to teaching. Teachers know that their students develop language competencies in different ways and at different rates, and that learning needs must be addressed as they arise and in the ways that seem most appropriate. Adaptability and creativity are far more effective in the classroom than thoroughgoing applications of a single approach. Most teachers' experience validates this philosophy every day. They recognize that no single instructional method or sequence of lessons can serve all students or all situations.

Despite the array of instructional approaches being used in individual classrooms, teachers do appear to share many views about teaching and learning in the English language arts. What are these views? What are some of the elements of this common vision?

First, and most important, teachers share a belief that students should develop competencies in the English language arts that will prepare them for the diverse literacy demands that will face them throughout their lives. Second, teachers agree that the English language arts are important not only as subjects in and of themselves, but also as supporting skills for students' learning in all other subjects. The English language arts help students gather and convey information about mathematics, history, science, the arts, and an array of other subjects, and in all of these subjects students use language to solve problems, theorize, and synthesize. Third, teachers agree that students can best develop language competencies (like other competencies) through meaningful activities and settings, such as reading and viewing whole texts, writing and creating visual images for recognizable purposes, and speaking and listening to others both within and outside the classroom.

Obviously, however, it is not enough simply to set forth a shared vision: English language arts teachers must also identify and remove the barriers that prevent that vision from being translated into practice. For example, teachers often receive conflicting messages about what they should be doing. They may be told they should respond to the need for reforms and innovations while at the same time being discouraged from making their instructional practices look too different from those of the past.

In addition, while many teachers wish to gauge their students' learning using performance-based assessment, they find that preparing students for machine-scored tests-which often focus on isolated skills rather than contextualized learning—diverts valuable

classroom time away from the development of actual performance. Similarly, in many schools, the pressure to use particular textbooks discourages teachers from using materials that take advantage of students' interests and needs and that involve them productively in the curriculum. In these schools, students may be forced to follow prescribed sequences of instruction rather than engage in authentic, open-ended learning experiences. So, too, the widespread practice of dividing the class day into separate periods precludes integration among the English language arts and other subject areas.

Thus, while the shared vision of English language arts education we describe is already being implemented in many classrooms, there is clearly a need to do more. By articulating standards, we hope to make it easier for a shared vision to become a reality.

To Promote Equity and Excellence for All

One of our nation's greatest aspirations has been to provide equal educational opportunities for all. It is clear, however, that we have frequently fallen short of this goal with children of the poor, students from certain linguistic and cultural groups, and those in need of special education.

We believe that defining standards furnishes the occasion for examining the education of students who previously have not fully enjoyed prospects for high attainment. In a democracy, free and universal schooling is meant to prepare *all* students to become literate adults capable of critical thinking, listening, and reading, and skilled in speaking and writing. Failure to prepare our students for these tasks undermines not only our nation's vision of public education, but our democratic ideal. The consent of the governed is the basis of governmental legitimacy, and if that consent is not informed, then the foundations of government are shaky indeed.

Some of the most generously supported schools in the world are found in our nation's affluent suburbs, while many economically disadvantaged schools around the country are struggling to survive. A vast gulf in academic resources and accomplishments exists between the children of the rich and the children of the poor, and between the powerful and the powerless. This often leads to sharp differences in the opportunities provided to students with linguistic and cultural backgrounds that differ from those of mainstream students.

Students in special education programs in our country also often receive fewer educational opportunities than other students. Students designated as having learning disabilities, hearing or visual impairments, emotional or behavioral disorders, or who have orthopedic or cognitive disabilities do present us with instructional challenges. However, when we view these exceptional conditions as individual variations and provide personalized, expert instruction, students with disabilities can reach their academic potential.

It is, in fact, teachers' responsibility to recognize and value all children's rich and varied potentials for learning and to provide appropriate educational opportunities to nurture them. If we learn to recognize and value a variety of student abilities in the language arts and then build on those strengths, we make it possible for all students to attain high standards. Some will do so quickly and others more slowly, but to bridge the wide disparities in literacy attainment and to prepare all students to become informed and literate citizens, we must hold these high expectations for every student and every school. It is the responsibility not only of schools and teachers, but also of policymakers, parents, and communities, to support the schools.
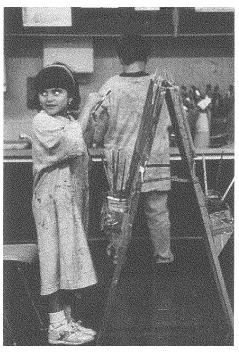
At the same time, we understand that standards, by themselves, cannot erase the impact

of poverty, ethnic and cultural discrimination, family illiteracy, and social and political disenfranchisement. If all students are to receive equal educational opportunities and meet high expectations for performance, then these issues have to be addressed. Four factors are especially important: (a) learning how to learn, (b) equal access to school resources, (c) an adequate number of knowledgeable teachers, and (d) safe, well-equipped schools.

Learning How to Learn

Students not only need to develop specific competencies and to acquire knowledge—they also need abundant opportunities to reflect on the process of learning itself. The conscious process of learning how to learn is an essential element in students' language arts education, and it forms a central theme in the standards detailed in Chapter 3.

Knowing how to learn has not often been highlighted explicitly as part of instructional content in the English language arts. It has commonly been assumed that "bright" learners come by such knowledge "naturally" in the course of learning subject-matter content. The view of language learning presented here, in contrast, emphasizes the importance of explicit attention to the learning process for all students: learning how to learn ought to be considered as fundamental as other, more widely recognized, basic skills in English language arts.

All students have the ability to learn, but teachers can make that ability accessible by helping students reflect upon, and monitor, their own learning. When students see themselves as able learners, capable of monitoring and controlling their learning, they are more willing to tackle challenging tasks and take the risks that move their learning forward. As students move from school into their adult responsibilities at work and in the wider society, knowing how to learn will help them succeed in a changing economy and will enable them to become self-motivated, flexible lifelong learners.

By being attentive to, and talking about, their own learning strategies, students develop this sense of themselves as resourceful learners and provide their teachers with valuable insights into their development. If students are conscious of the strategies they use, they are better able to recognize when a familiar strategy is not working, and they are more prepared to adapt or abandon one strategy in favor of more effective alternatives.

Our conviction that all students can learn and can understand the processes of learning leads us to stress that all students can, with appropriate instruction and experiences, achieve high standards. The learner-centered perspective presented in this document is, therefore, also a learning-centered model. Teachers who implement this model help students see themselves as competent learners who understand the value of consciously reflecting upon their learning processes. Learning how to learn is at the heart of all of the standards and is reflected in various ways in each of them.

Equal Access to Resources

If all students are to have equal opportunities to meet these standards, then all schools must have sufficient funds to hire well-qualified teachers and staff, to acquire high-quality instructional

materials, and to purchase essential supplies such as books, paper, and desks. This means that states and communities must address the often serious funding inequities across school districts. In most states, the wealthiest school districts spend two to five times as much per student as the poorest districts, and more than twenty years of community efforts and litigation have not resolved these structural inequalities. Today, as we write this document, there are public school teachers across the country who must spend their own money for their students to have even the minimum—pencils, paper, and books—in an era when computer technology is rapidly becoming a necessary part of instruction.

To be sure, money alone does not guarantee academic excellence. If funding is not used for constructive purposes such as obtaining better instructional materials, reducing class size, or supporting professional development, then all the money in the world will not improve student outcomes. Schools can be expected to help their students meet high standards, however, only if they possess adequate resources.
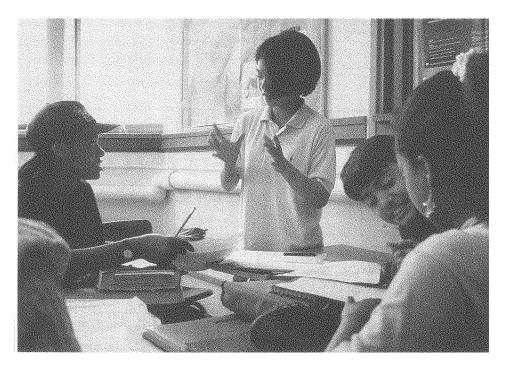
Adequate Staffing

Schools must also have an adequate number of knowledgeable teachers. Overcrowded classrooms make it virtually impossible to carry out the kinds of individualized and performance-oriented instruction essential to meeting the standards. Yet, in many schools, teachers are typically assigned to classrooms with thirty or forty students or more. In such settings, chances for meaningful interaction between teacher and student are slim, and opportunities for good teaching and learning are severely compromised.

It is not enough to have a sufficient number of well-qualified teachers, though; these teachers need to have access to ongoing opportunities for professional development. School districts need to provide both funding and support for teachers' attendance at off-site conferences and staff development programs. Teachers need opportunities to share ideas, engage in research, assist one another, and continue learning about and responding to changes in their fields. Schools need to nurture an atmosphere of learning that promotes teachers' growth along with that of their students.

Safe, Well-Equipped Schools

The current epidemic of violence in our schools and neighborhoods presents perhaps the single most serious threat to students' learning and to achieving the standards set forth here. Students deserve safe environments for learning. They can scarcely be expected to care about literacy or learning if they must constantly worry about being attacked in the hall or the schoolyard. Therefore, states and communities must do all they can to ensure that students are protected. Ideally, schools will become nurturing spaces where students are free to learn without the need for protection.

The condition and appearance of the school are also important aspects of the learning environment. Too many schools, particularly those in economically disadvantaged communities, have suffered from years of neglect and are sadly in need of repair. Some schools recruit student volunteers and employees to help with painting and renovation, but in many cases the major repairs needed go well beyond the capabilities of volunteer workers. Communities should provide necessary resources to ensure that their schools are well-maintained, brightly lit, attractive settings that encourage learning.

In summary, IRA and NCTE hope and believe that the standards put forth in this document will prepare students for the literacy challenges they will face throughout their lives; bring greater coherence and clarity to teaching and learning in the English language arts; and provide greater opportunities for all students to become literate.

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