On January 31, 2019, Florida’s newly-elected Governor Ron DeSantis issued Executive Order 19-32, which called for new English Language Arts (ELA) and math standards.¹ In Spring 2020, the Florida Department of Education released its Benchmarks for Excellent Student Thinking (B.E.S.T.) Standards.²

We were commissioned to conduct a thorough and independent review of the B.E.S.T. ELA standards in light of the relevant research about student learning; our team’s experience in designing and evaluating ELA and social studies materials in systems around the United States; and our longstanding study of the curricula and assessments that support high-performing school systems around the world.

The fundamental goals of learning standards are mission critical: Florida’s theory about the purpose of education goes directly to what it means to be an educated person. The B.E.S.T.

² Florida’s B.E.S.T. Standards, “Florida’s B.E.S.T. Standards: English Language Arts” (Florida Department of Education, 2020), http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/18736/urlt/ELAStandards.PDF. Because this document is the subject of this report, we reference it by page number throughout.
ELA document opens with Frederick Douglass's understanding of the purpose of education (*Blessings of Liberty and Education*, 1894):

Education...means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth. The light by which men can only be made free. To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature. It is easy to deny them the means of freedom and the rightful pursuit of happiness and to defeat the very end of their being (5).

The B.E.S.T. standards’ Introduction notes, in response:

Florida’s B.E.S.T. standards encourage educators to act on Douglass’s reminder of the ultimate purpose of education. His words confirm that education must be enlightening, noble, and good. He speaks from a tradition that holds education in the highest regard. The Latin root of the word *education* is *educare*, which means “to bring forth, to bring up.” Douglass understood that education is the way to bring forth our greatest capacities. Knowledge is the pathway to liberty, which is a fundamental value guaranteed by our government (5).

The Introduction further connects this deeper goal to the ELA standards, namely: “The implementation of these standards will encourage schools, districts, and educators to adopt and build a rich, deep, and meaningful curriculum that ‘uplifts the soul’ (5). It then describes educators in vocational terms; their “true calling” is “educating the hearts, souls, and minds of their students” (5).

Fundamentals matter not only in terms of ends but also of (subject-specific) means. How, exactly, are teachers to make the above vision possible, in an ELA classroom? Here, too, the state offers concrete guidance for teachers and parents that carries theory into classroom practices.

One could take issue with FDOE’s articulated theory of ELA education. It could be critiqued from a pragmatic perspective – is it focused enough on preparing students for a shifting job market? – or a theoretical perspective - does it ignore important reading theories, such as the “new historicism” that puts more emphasis on the contexts in which works are written?

However, based on our research on top-performing countries and on reading programs that show efficacy in the United States, and on the core educational rationale for the humanities themselves, we applaud Florida for its decision to focus on the goal of reading to support the learning growth and human development of its students.

One could also take issue with the B.E.S.T. standards’ (often inferred) core conception of the teacher; certainly, some theories of education offer a different view of teaching ELA, with the main focus on honing in on certain imputed skills, such as “find the main idea.” Once again, we commend Florida’s approach, which is to see the teacher as enabling literature to bring knowledge – of the human condition and the world – to its students.
We believe that the state is unique in supporting this approach with a remarkably coherent vision – and an explicit and sequenced strategy for achieving it. We find this both refreshing and long overdue.

In our judgment, the Florida B.E.S.T. ELA standards come closer to best practice than do those of any other state in our country. They should ultimately be evaluated in this international light, rather than that of the Common Core State Standards alone.

No standards are perfect, even where reviewers – based on the strongest evidence – support the basic design. The following report sets out the B.E.S.T. standards’ strong and, in some cases, unique contributions to the field; suggests changes that would render them still more robust; and responds to a recent report that evaluates the B.E.S.T. standards against a set of rubrics that appear to be based on the Common Core State Standards. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to Florida’s B.E.S.T. ELA standards as “B.E.S.T. standards” throughout the review.

**Strengths**

**Strength 1: First-Order Focus on Knowledge-Building**

*Florida is noteworthy for its insistence that knowledge-building is the foundation of learning.* Indeed, the state embeds this core principle into statute, extending it not only to curriculum but to teacher preparation programs and in-service trainings. The governing 219-page document references “background knowledge” more than forty times, stating simply that “literacy is not achievable merely through a skills-based approach” but, rather, “depends more on relevant background knowledge than on mastery of reading strategies. Critical thinking cannot be separated from the object of that thinking. We cannot think deeply, creatively, or critically about a subject if we have little knowledge of it” (6). What is more, this literary knowledge-building is to connect with other subjects, to produce in the end a “robust curriculum” that includes “a full appreciation of history, art, music, and other disciplines that were sidelined in favor of a focus on abstract reading strategies” (6).

The focus on knowledge-building draws directly from the research of E.D. Hirsch, Dan Willingham, and Jeanne Chall, among other scholars, and popularized recently by Natalie Wexler. This research base shows that learning to read and then reading to learn do not

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occur organically or naturally, or even by applying the skills of de-coding and inference, but rather by amassing concrete, voluminous background knowledge about the world and the human condition once basic phonics and phonemic awareness have been achieved.

The necessity of background knowledge in understanding vocabulary rightly appears at every grade level. In first and second grades, for instance, we find:

**First Grade: 1.V.1.3:** Identify and use picture clues, context clues, word relationships, reference materials, and/or background knowledge to determine the meaning of unknown words. **Background Clarification:** Instruction for this benchmark should include text read-alouds and think-alouds aimed at building and activating background knowledge (40).

**Second Grade: 2.V.1.3:** Identify and use context clues, word relationships, reference materials, and/or background knowledge to determine the meaning of unknown words. **Background Clarification 1:** Instruction for this benchmark should include text read-alouds and think-alouds aimed at building and activating background knowledge. Review of words learned in this way is critical to building background knowledge and related vocabulary (48).

The same principle is echoed across the grades.

Background knowledge also appears in the B.E.S.T. standards’ rubrics for text complexity, which include scoring guidelines for “Student-Centered” after those for “Quantitative” and “Qualitative”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student-centered</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students can fully understand the text without specific background knowledge.</td>
<td>Students with limited background knowledge may understand the text, but some levels of meaning may be impeded by lack of prior exposure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The B.E.S.T. standards also carry background knowledge into their requirement that the ELA curriculum include texts that build students’ civics knowledge. The introduction to this section states:

> Florida is committed to helping students build background knowledge, so much so that it is codified in statute...These civic-focused texts are the source of building background knowledge and vocabulary in the lower grades and a rich study in rhetoric, reasoning, and argumentation in the upper grades (168).

Thus, we find Peter Spier’s classic *Star-Spangled Banner* in K and first grade; the text of *The Gettysburg Address* in fourth/fifth; the major civil rights Supreme Court cases in middle school; and Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural* and the Florida Constitution in high school (168-
These texts are intended to prepare for, and then reinforce, what Florida’s students learn in their social studies courses, which are assessed for stakes.\textsuperscript{5}

We know of no other state that elevates the body of research about background knowledge so explicitly and so consistently.

If supported with meaningful professional development, the result will constitute a holistic system built of mutually-reinforcing components, reflecting international best practices.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Strength 2: Coherence}

Florida’s approach to the standards is part of an explicit, comprehensive approach to education. The FDOE’s memorandum to school superintendents (February 2020) on the timeline indicates the B.E.S.T. standards’ integration with instructional materials adoption, curriculum implementation (including professional development), and new statewide assessments.\textsuperscript{7} With the exception of Massachusetts in its 1993 reform act and following,\textsuperscript{8} and the partial exception Louisiana’s (current) pilot assessment in ELA and social studies,\textsuperscript{9} the B.E.S.T. standards mark the first time that we have seen a state committed to integrating these four key elements of education into a coherent whole for all of its public school students.

One component of Florida’s approach that ties together classroom, materials, educators, and student assessments, is the introduction, in ninth grade, of “universal themes.” The B.E.S.T. standards explain a universal theme as “an idea that applies to anyone, anywhere, regardless of cultural differences.” They continue:

\begin{quote}
Examples include but are not limited to an individual’s struggle toward understanding, awareness, and/or spiritual enlightenment; the tension between the ideal and the real; the conflict between human beings and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) requires middle school students to pass an end-of-course (EOC) Civics assessment and, in 10\textsuperscript{th} grade, an EOC U.S. History assessment.


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advancements in technology/science; the impact of the past on the present; the inevitability of fate; the struggle for equality; and the loss of innocence (125).

Such an approach invites students into the larger questions that have preoccupied human beings throughout history, animate the great works of literature, and are of keen interest to adolescents. This framework also offers a through-line between texts, units, and even grades, that allow classroom conversations to deepen. Finally, it opens the door to more meaningful assessments that ask students to connect ideas across time and place – a signature feature of assessments in high-performing systems.

**Strength 3: Instructional Guidance**

The B.E.S.T. standards are not dry and abstract principles; they are coupled with concrete guidance for educators (“Benchmark Clarification”). The state views this guidance as part of the standards, rather than ancillary to them.

Why is this right and important?

It is important, because as RAND’s survey of a nationally representative sample of ELA teachers found, merely providing standards to teachers is of limited efficacy. In fact, “ELA teachers reported that their students engaged less in several standards-aligned practices in 2017 than in 2016.” Specifically, with respect to key aspects of their practice in relationship to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers’ reports indicated a drift away from standards-required actions:

**ELA teachers were less likely to regard the use of complex texts as aligned with their standards** [emphasis in the original text]. The survey asked teachers to indicate which approaches for selecting texts were aligned with their state’s standards for ELA, as well as which reading approach was most aligned with their standards. While the use of complex texts is emphasized in most state standards, [we found that] significantly fewer ELA teachers indicated that "assigning complex texts that all students in a class are required to read" was aligned with their standards in 2017 than had in 2016 (37 percent versus 48 percent); the majority of teachers regarded "selecting texts for individual students based on their reading level" as aligned with their standards (73 percent in 2016 versus 68 percent in 2017). The percentage of teachers of less-vulnerable students who chose "assigning complex texts" also declined significantly from 2016 to 2017.10

Given this, Florida’s translation of what each concept means in clear terms, and with appropriate examples, makes it more likely that the standards will be deployed in the classroom.

There are at least four ways in which the B.E.S.T. standards connect these dots.

First, by placing clarifications directly after each standard. For instance, the Kindergarten standard K.R.2.4., “Explain the difference between opinions and facts about a topic,” is followed by two Benchmark Clarifications and an example:

- **Clarification 1:** Students will explain which statements are fact and which are opinions within a text.
- **Clarification 2:** Students will orally explain that facts are things that a person knows about something that that can be proven true or false. Students will orally explain that opinions are what a person thinks about something, often related to feelings or beliefs. Opinions cannot be proven true or false.
  - **Example:** “Dogs need food and water to survive” is a fact. It can be proven to be true. “Dogs are the best pets” is an opinion. It’s what someone may think, but it can’t be proven (28).

Or, a writing standard that appears in many grades, “With guidance and support from adults [or not, as the grades progress], improve drawing and writing, as needed, by planning, revising, and editing,” is immediately followed by the Clarification:

  “As needed” refers to the fact that sometimes instruction will focus on a specific skill or part of the process. For example, a lesson may focus on planning. In those instances, only the planning step would be focused on. By the end of the year, students should have ample opportunities to engage in planning, revising, and editing.

Such guidance could help teachers focus on what matters; it sets reasonable limits on what could possibly be expected or required in every lesson.

Another first-grade standard (1.F.1.4.) states, “Read grade-level texts with accuracy, automaticity, and appropriate prosody or expression.” This is followed by five Clarifications of what this might look like in a first-grade classroom (36). Another first-grade standard (1.R.1.2.), “Identify and explain the moral of a story,” is given the following Clarification:

This benchmark introduces the moral of a story as a precursor to theme in second grade. A moral is the lesson of a story. During instruction, let students know that not all stories have a lesson by referring to stories read that did not have a moral or a lesson (36).

Such instructional guidelines seem to us innovative, clear, and additive.

One of our favorite examples comes from second grade. The Clarification for Standard 2.R.1.4., “Identify rhyme schemes in poems,” illustrates very practically how students recognize and annotate rhyme schemes, using two nursery rhymes (44). A classroom
instructor need not leaf through pages, or search online elsewhere, for samples; they are at the ready. This cannot help but bolster novice educators’ confidence.

**Benchmark Clarifications:**

*Clarification 1.* Students will mark rhyme scheme and recognize rhyme scheme notation. Rhyme scheme notation uses capital letters, starting with A to mark the end of each line, repeating the letter for each line in the poem that rhymes with that line and progressing through the alphabet for each new end rhyme. Lines designated with the same letter all rhyme with each other.

**Examples:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I never saw a Purple Cow, A</th>
<th>Little Miss Muffet A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I never hope to see one; B</td>
<td>Sat on a tuffet, A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But I can tell you, anyhow, A</td>
<td>Eating her curds and whey; B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'd rather see than be one B</td>
<td>Along came a spider C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Gelett Burgess</td>
<td>Who sat down beside her C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And frightened Miss Muffet away. B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Traditional Nursery Rhyme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Second, by linking standards to what happened in earlier grades and what will happen in later ones.** For instance, a fourth-grade standard (4.C.1.2), “Write personal or fictional narratives using a logical sequence of events and demonstrating an effective use of techniques such as descriptions and transitional words and phrases,” locates students’ learning progression in the Benchmark Clarification:

Students were introduced to dialogue in 3rd grade. Although it is not mentioned specifically in this benchmark, students should continue to practice the technique and receive instruction in it. Dialogue is included for mastery in the 5th grade benchmark (62).

**Third, by helping teachers bring more depth and nuance in the classroom.** One fourth-grade standard (4.C.4.1.), “Conduct research to answer a question, organizing information about the topic, using multiple valid sources,” clarifies that “while the benchmark does require that students consult multiple sources, there is no requirement that they use every source they consult. Part of the skill in researching is discernment – being able to tell which information is relevant and which sources are trustworthy enough to include “(64).

The above guidance shows the state’s understanding of what it can be like for teachers to interpret standards. “Do they have to use every source?” is a natural question, particularly for first-year teachers. The state removes that anxiety and sets the educator’s mind on the higher goal: discriminating between strong and weak sources, between those that make one’s point perfectly and those that are off the mark. How many state standards talk about “discernment?” This, in our view, gestures towards what Douglass meant in 1834.

The instructional guidance also pushes for rigor. A seventh-grade standard (7.R.1.2), “Compare two or more themes and their development throughout a literary text,” clarifies...
that “theme is not a one- or two-word topic, but a complete thought that communicates the author’s message” (86). Or, when a tenth-grade standard (10.R.1.1) states, “Analyze how key elements enhance or add layers of meaning and/or style in a literary text,” educators find immediately which four layers to look for:

Layer 1 literal level, what the words actually mean; Layer 2 mood, those feelings that are evoked in the reader; Layer 3 tone, the author’s attitude; Layer 4 author’s purpose or interpretation of author’s purpose (114).

Fourth, by elaborating the standards with user-friendly charts and appendices. In every grade, we find charts that show which standards each sample text supports. Or, having set out the literary periods which high school students should encounter, the state provides descriptive charts that characterize each period and notes the authors associated with it (165-67).

The B.E.S.T. standards, in other words, have been constructed with the classroom in mind. The coupling of abstract standards and explanatory guidance seems to us a meaningful step forward in the world of state standards.

**Strength 4: Design**

The standards’ architecture follows a “begin with the end in mind” design; its framers back-mapped the desired outcomes, in both knowledge and skills, from twelfth grade back to Kindergarten. We have not seen this in other ELA standards.

Additionally, the B.E.S.T. standards indicate clearly which concepts are added at each grade level, in each “vertical progression.”

For example, the Poetry standard shows the progression of learning, from “identify[ing] rhyme in a poem” in Kindergarten to “Evaluat[ing] works of major poets in their historical context” in senior year (14):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R.1.4 Poetry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>R.1.4</strong> Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.12.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.11.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.10.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.9.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.8.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.7.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.6.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.5.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.4.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL.A.3.R.1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The purpose here is to “help with vertical planning within a district or school system” and “provide a framework for teachers to enable scaffolds for students who may need remediation” (13).

**Recommendations for Improvement**

The B.E.S.T. standards are very strong but, as indicated above, can usefully be made still stronger. There are at least two major ways in which they could be improved.

**Recommendation 1: Clarify whether texts are mandatory or suggested**

We could not tell from the B.E.S.T. standards to what extent the listed texts needed to be read. It is clear that no teacher could deliver *all* the texts in a given year; there are far too many. But how to choose? On what basis? And what are the consequences for assessments?

The state needs to be more explicit about what is expected in terms of teachers’ choosing some rough percentage of these texts, or some rough percentage of time spent with these texts, during each grade.

**Recommendation 2: Consider a constrained choice for literary periods**

As it stands, it appears that high school teachers may choose texts from any of nine different literary periods. This introduces potential downsides, namely:

- If teachers can choose, in any given year, from nine different periods, then any given student might miss several periods entirely or encounter them repeatedly (depending on what their teachers selected).
- Students miss out on the chance to encounter ELA and social studies texts in an integrated way. Such opportunities are invaluable for situating texts into context.
- Assessments lose a critical component in this framework. If literary periods were sequenced, assessments could follow suit much more readily.

There is no ideal way to approach which literary periods should be studied in which year. However, narrowing the field somewhat, and tying literary periods loosely to students’ coursework in social studies where possible, could support the systematic acquisition of background knowledge.

**Recommendation 3: Make a number of modest changes that will strengthen the Standards**

As indicated below, we agree with a small number of relatively easy fixes – most especially in filling in a few lacunae and expanding the development of multi-media skills.
Response to the Fordham Report

In June 2020, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute released *The State of the Sunshine State Standards: Florida’s B.E.S.T. Edition*, authored by Solomon Friedberg, Tim Shanahan, Francis (Skip) Fennell, Douglas Fisher, and Roger Howe. This team brings substantial experience to the work, having conducted previous reviews of earlier state standards. Because Shanahan and Fisher led the ELA review, we refer to the ELA team as Shanahan & Fisher. For the purpose of our review, we do not rehearse all of their points – positive and negative – but, rather, focus on where we think their judgments are helpful or, by contrast, distracting and perhaps not fully informed by the Florida materials.

*Points of Agreement with Shanahan & Fisher*

- **Multimedia.** We concur with Shanahan & Fisher’s recommendations that the standards include more explicit support for students’ multimedia capabilities, by explicitly “requiring that they [students] be able to interpret multimedia, digital, or technology-based information.”
- **List of Texts.** As indicated above, we agree that the state should be more specific about the intended use of the listed texts. Florida does note that the texts are “samples,” so they are clearly not all required reading, but more guidance would be useful.
- **Modest revisions to progressions.** A modest number of progressions should be reviewed for sequencing and redundant repetitions. We reject the idea that this is in any way a major issue – see below.

We do not believe that taking these changes on board need be time-consuming, nor do we believe that diminish, fundamentally, the inherent quality of the B.E.S.T. standards.

*Evaluation of Shanahan & Fisher’s Other Criticisms*

Our review differs from Shanahan & Fisher in substantive ways, however. Below, we explain why we do not share six of their criticisms.

*Criticism 1: The B.E.S.T. standards should be graded as “weak”*

We reject this grading and thus the rubric (with its weightings) used to produce it. Shanahan & Fischer note that the B.E.S.T. standards, “Do a fine job of emphasizing the development of the ability to read and interpret literary and informational texts in grades K-12.” They add that the standards, in their strong focus on the need to read grade-level texts, bolster this focus with “up-to-date information concerning quantitative and qualitative expectations

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32 Friedberg et al., 12.
33 Friedberg et al., 10.
of reading performance across the grades” and “do a good job of emphasizing that the teaching of foundational skills in reading and writing.”

Frankly, we would be delighted to find other ELA standards about which these three key statements could be made with as much justification. Arguing that any set of ELA standards about which this can be said are “weak” is akin to a restaurant critic saying that while the food and ambiance was excellent, the tap water had no ice. There is one more substantive criticism that Shanahan & Fischer make about the lack of support for “disciplinary learning” that would be substantive – but as we indicate below, we regard this criticism as misplaced.

**Criticism 2: The B.E.S.T. standards contain no oral presentation and evaluation rubrics**

We believe this criticism is simply mistaken. From pages 188 through 195, that is exactly what the B.E.S.T standards lay out in detail.

**Criticism 3: The B.E.S.T. standards do not adequately support students’ collaboration or discussion**

Shanahan & Fisher state, “Florida students will be expected to make oral presentations but not to develop the skills to contribute to a conversation, discussion, or debate. Even more puzzling is the omission of any standard for the ability to listen effectively or critically.”

We believe this criticism is somewhat mistaken. On p.147 of the B.E.S.T. standards, Expectation ELA K12.EE.4.1 “Use appropriate collaborative techniques and active listening skills when engaging in discussions for a variety of situations,” is followed by grade-band-specific clarifications of the expectations. At most, one could ask for more specificity in terms of skill level – but we find considerable content in the B.E.S.T. standards on oral skills.

**Criticism 4: The B.E.S.T. standards do not specify learning outcomes**

Shanahan & Fisher do not believe the standards provide concrete learning outcomes. They note, for example, “The writing standards sometimes emphasize processes or instructional activities rather than measurable learning outcomes.” Note first that this is a vague critique; do Shanahan & Fisher mean that in at least two (or ten, or fifty) instances, they can’t find any learning outcomes specified for a required activity – or rather than such outcomes are not emphasized?

What is evident is that Florida’s standards lay out forty-six distinct writing-convention goals, by grade level (196-7.) First-grade students are to master the skill of capitalizing proper

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14 Friedberg et.al., 10,11.
16 Friedberg et al., 14.
nouns, while eighth graders are to master the use of voice and mood in verb use. Perhaps the critique is that in some cases, teachers need more guidance on how to evaluate student success in meeting these outcome goals. But surely this is a task for assessments, both within curriculum and at the state level?

Perhaps Shanahan & Fisher do not see the outcomes, because (as in the case of oral presentation) they are not examining the whole document.

**Criticism 5: The B.E.S.T. standards do not support disciplinary literacy**

Here are Shanahan & Fischer:

First, the standards fail to include any disciplinary literacy requirements. Research has shown that reading and writing in science, mathematics, history, and literature are unique or highly specialized in their purposes, skills or strategies, linguistic demands, text formatting, and other features. Accordingly, college- and career-ready students must be able to do more than exhibit the general reading skills enumerated in the Florida standards. Although these standards provide a reasonable delineation of literary reading (particularly with regard to poetry) and of general informational text reading, they omit entirely the idea of developing any of the specialized reading skills for dealing with texts in science, mathematics, and history or of any of their subspecialties such as biology or geography. The theory underlying these standards seems to be that readers should be able to make sense of any kind of text equally well, ignoring the burgeoning research showing important differences across disciplines.\(^{17}\)

Apparently, they hold that not including "specialized reading skills . . . in science, mathematics . . . biology or geography" was an explicit failure on the part of the Florida ELA standards writers, who had adhered to an obviously flawed theory. But there is no evidence at all to support this attribution of intent. Two obvious explanations are much closer to hand.

First, simply put, ELA shouldn't be responsible for all those other literacies: as is the case for science, for example (see the Next Generation Science Standards), ELA deserves its own domain, while realizing that it can appropriately include written material in related genres such as civics and philosophy.

Since the CSSS ELA standards are, by implication, highly rated for their gestures towards other disciplines, it is worth pausing for a moment to look at what is actually there. In fact, we lack any solid evidence that ELA standards, when it came to embracing science and technology, have had any substantive national impact on the behavior of science teachers. Did those standards writers really expect science teachers to become ELA teachers by default? What gives to the creators of ELA standards the right to claim the epistemological or pedagogic territory of other disciplines? In fact, the very language CCSS uses is, arguably, extremely awkward. Take the instruction to science teachers in the ELA standards on science and technology, middle school: “Analyze the author’s purpose in providing an explanation,

\(^{17}\) Friedberg et al. 16.
describing a procedure, or discussing an experiment in a text” (emphasis added). Actually, perhaps not: ascribing intentionality to the authors of a chemistry textbook is not an intellectually defensible or pedagogically plausible demand on chemistry teachers.

But there is a second, more obvious reason why the B.E.S.T. standards authors didn’t include discipline-focused reading standards: Florida already has them, in detail. See the state’s “Literacy for Learning in the Content Areas.” If one consults the standards table for Science and Technical Subjects, one finds that these standards are actually more detailed than those in the CCSS, and come with useful teacher-supporting materials that include sample texts, evaluation rubrics, and sample questions.

The most generous reading of Shanahan & Fischer’s critique is either that they were not aware of these standards, or that they would argue that these subject-matter standards should have been explicitly referenced in the ELA standards.

In our view, the hope that teachers in other disciplines will be motivated to take on reading standards projected from ELA, as opposed to those that are integral to their own disciplines, is unlikely to be realized at any scale. The better way to proceed is to work with the standards-setting bodies in those disciplines to ensure that they include relevant and integrated reading standards if and when they are truly applicable.

We accept that the civics/social studies case is sui generis. Many major documents, for example, are of both are of both literary and historical importance, and the standards for reading them carefully will overlap. Such overlap is recognized in the Louisiana Pilot Assessment, in which students take an assessment that integrates content from both the ELA and social studies curriculum.

**Criticism 6: The B.E.S.T. standards do not support evaluative judgment**

In our view, this is – if merited - the most serious criticism from Shanahan & Fischer: "Students will certainly learn to comprehend what they read, but any kind of critical or evaluative analysis of what they read is barely apparent" (the authors note that this is not true in the case of "reading arguments.”)

But the criticism is not merited. It is simply inaccurate. See, for example, the twelfth-grade reading standard, “Evaluate how key elements enhance or add layers of meaning and/or style in a literary text and explain the functional significance of those elements in interpreting the text” (13); or this ninth-grade reading standard (of Antigone by Jean Anouilh), “Evaluate the support an author uses to develop the central idea throughout a text”

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(111); or, in the case of the poem “O Captain, My Captain,” “Evaluate an author’s use of rhetoric in text” (113).

But there is a more important point here. What would it possibly mean for a 10th grader to produce an “evaluative analysis” (to use Shanahan & Fischer’s language) of Macbeth, which is on the 10th grade Florida list, or for a slightly older student to critically evaluate Crime and Punishment? Florida recommends outstanding literature and poetry and rightly asks for careful close reading and a reasonable understanding of such works. It does not ask young students to tell us if they think Macbeth is a convincing play about fate, predestination, and ambition; it asks, as it should, that students and teachers work together to analyze what the play portrays about those inexhaustibly rich themes. That is why the B.E.S.T. standards are right to place greater attention to “evaluation” on informational texts, where issues of appropriate empirical support for an argument, or failures of argumentative structure, are rightly worth learning to critique.

Conclusion

It is clear from Fordham’s review of the Florida B.E.S.T. standards that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are the benchmark against which all other standards are compared. The CCSS are the only ELA standard of the 15 standards evaluated to receive a rating of “strong” – with a 9 out of 10. This is not the place, clearly, to articulate an evaluation of the CCSS. But since Shanahan & Fischer used the same scoring rubrics to evaluate the B.E.S.T. standards, the results, in our view, suggest two provisional conclusions that are not mutually exclusive. It is possible, as we suggest, that their review was not complete due to insufficient attention to the full B.E.S.T. standards document and other Florida state material, and/or that the rubrics used by Fordham’s reviewers for the evaluation of the previous standards (including the CCSS) require revision.

In its essential elements, the B.E.S.T standards are the strongest in ELA currently in use in the United States. We would need to re-review the earlier, pre-CCSS Massachusetts standards before judging relative merit; that is now an academic point. With modest additions and clarifications, the Florida standards can stand as a new model for the country. Our hope is that the state’s rightly ambitious outline for what comes next – including support for curriculum and assessments that are linked to these standards – will be realized. Only through such an integration will the state ensure that the many pieces of an education model are truly coherent, and that all the key stakeholders, most importantly students and teachers, are rightly supported to achieve the strongest academic outcomes.
References


