**Louisiana Reading Association**

**Position Paper: Common Core State Standards**

Adopted April 2012

Along with most of the United States, the state of Louisiana has adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to define the knowledge and skills needed by students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Resulting from a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and other experts, and are intended to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare children for college and the workforce (http://www.corestandards.org/).

The CCSS explicitly address content and skills for English Language Arts and Mathematics. In addition, standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, and science/technical subjects are included. Clearly, language and literacy comprise the primary focus of these new standards. In contrast to standards derived from earlier reform efforts under No Child Left Behind legislation, the CCSS place a premium on helping children develop high level comprehension and composition skills through critical reading and writing in response to increasingly complex texts. While basic decoding and encoding skills remain an important facet of literacy instruction, the CCSS position such skills among many tools to be used in the service of comprehending and producing sophisticated written language.

The Louisiana Reading Association supports the state's move toward the meaning-based language and literacy instruction required to meet the CCSS. Use of these standards should prompt schools to adopt more balanced approaches to literacy than has been the case in the past decade as school systems increasingly adopted scripted programs that overemphasized constrained skills (Paris, 2005) to fit their interpretation of mandates implied in the federal Reading First initiative.

The Association supports the state's adoption of the CCSS with three significant caveats. First, use of the standards should not be mandated until the high stakes assessments in Louisiana are adapted to reflect the knowledge and skills addressed by the CCSS. Until those newer assessments are implemented, teachers should not have their effectiveness judged by children's performance on knowledge and skills included in current assessments that are no longer emphasized in their teaching. Second, it must be recognized that simply adopting new standards does not alone equip all teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to help children achieve them. Louisiana's engagement of teacher representatives from limited parishes in a pilot of the *Literacy Design Collaborative - A Teacher Tool for Implementing the CCSS* is an excellent first step, but addresses a tiny fraction of the teachers who will need this type of intensive support in their efforts to implement the new standards. Finally, the Association urges the state to carefully consider its approach to mandating use of specific complex texts for all children in a given grade level, particularly in preschool through third grade. While ample research supports the need to engage children in middle grades through high school with more sophisticated texts, there is not yet any research evidence that increasing the difficulty of books for younger children will correlate with better outcomes in later grades, much less in college or the workplace (Hiebert, 2011/2012). Texts for young children have already grown increasingly complex, with difficulty levels of kindergarten texts in current core reading programs now comparable to those of first grade texts from the 1980s (Hiebert, 2008). The work of Chall and colleagues (1996) and Hernandez (2011), both based on large national efforts, suggests that for third grade reading materials, lexile scores (the scale used by CCCS to identify text complexity) 200 points lower than recommended by the CCCS are appropriate for later reading success. To the extent that Louisiana chooses to mandate that children can only be taught from texts at the CCCS recommended lexile levels, implementation of the standards has the potential to exclude significant numbers of children from reaching their potential. A large body of research supports the practice of teaching children to read using texts that match their instructional levels; research that illustrates the deleterious effects of teaching children with texts that are at their frustration level is equally compelling (Allington, 2001, 2002). The Association urges the state to consider flexible approaches to ensuring students' use of complex literary and informational texts when "reading to learn" so that beginning readers are also afforded opportunities to use more accessible texts when "learning to read."

In summary, Louisiana's adoption of the Common Core State Standards has the potential to move the state toward more balanced, meaning based approaches to language and literacy instruction. The benefits of that move will only be realized when three conditions are met, including the implementation of new assessments that match the emphasis of the standards; the provision of support for all teachers to adapt to new demands; and a flexible approach to the selection of instructional texts to enable teachers to appropriately match text to children's instructional reading levels while also ensuring use of sufficiently complex texts to guarantee that Louisiana children are college and career ready.

References:

Allington, R. L. (2001). *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Interventions* (New York: Longman, 2001).

Allington, R. L. (2002). You can't learn much from books you can't read. *Educational Leadership, 60,* 16-19.

Chall, J. S., Bissex, G. L., Conard, S. S., & Harris-Sharples, S. (1996). Qualitative assessment of text difficulty. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Hernandez, D. J. (2011.). *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.* Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Hiebert, E. H. (2011/2012). The common core's staircase of text complexity: Getting the size of the first step right. *Reading Today, 29(3),* 26-27.

Heibert, E. H. (2008). The (mis)match between texts and students who depend on schools to become literate. In E.H. Hiebert and M. Sailors (Eds.), *Finding the Right Texts for Beginning and Struggling Readers: Research-Based Solutions* (pp. 1-21). NY: Guilford.

Paris, S. (2005). Reinterpreting the development of reading skills. *Reading Research Quarterly, 40(2)*, 184-202.