

Common Core, College Readiness Skills Don't Match Up, Study Says

By Catherine Gewertz on June 9, 2016 6:55 AM | 1 Comment

Teachers might be going astray if they're using the Common Core State Standards as a guide to build college readiness in writing, according to a new study.

The **ACT's latest National Curriculum Survey**, released Thursday, points out mismatches between the skills in certain parts of the common core and the skills college instructors consider most important for success in higher education.

ACT, which was at the table when the common standards were designed, and has consistently supported them, issued a statement by Chief Executive Officer Marten Roorda saying that the findings "should not be interpreted as a rebuke of the Common Core." The survey did, however, "highlight the disconnect between what is emphasized in the common core and what some college instructors perceive as important to college readiness," he said.

A key area of disconnection is in writing. In response to the common standards, many middle and high school teachers have been shifting to a focus on writing from sources. But college instructors told the ACT in its survey that they place more value on students' ability to generate good ideas for writing. The ability to analyze source texts was also prized more highly by high school teachers than by college instructors.

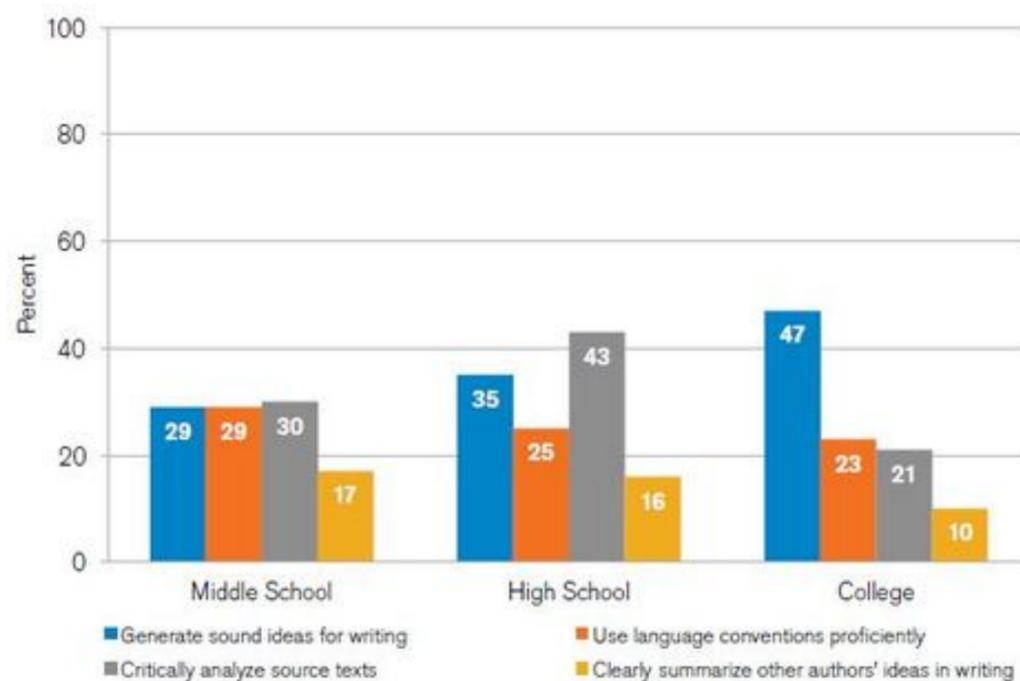


Figure 2.1. Percentages of educators reporting that a given approach to writing is the most important one in their courses

The survey found broader agreement about the reading skills necessary for success in college: Survey participants uniformly cited these five skills as most important: determining central ideas, identifying important details, drawing conclusions and making inferences, evaluating evidence and/or support for an author's claims, and distinguishing among fact, opinion and reasoned judgment. But postsecondary instructors gave low marks to their incoming students' strength in those skills.

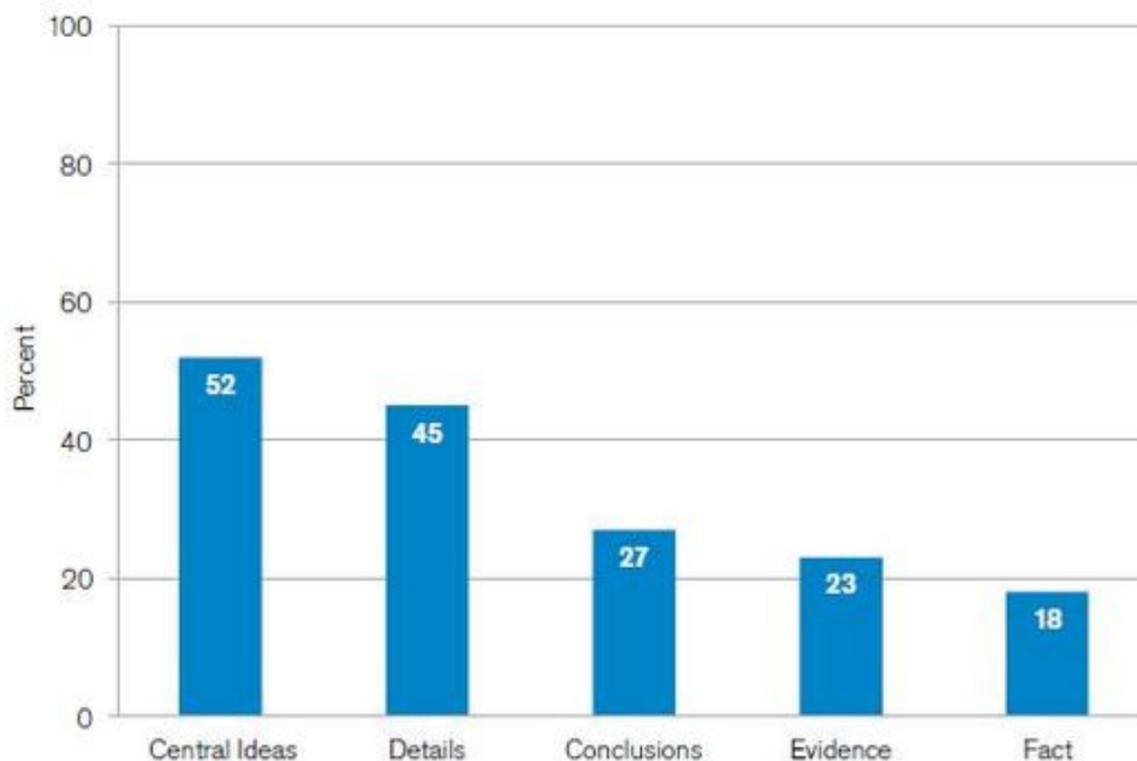


Figure 2.2. Percentages of college instructors rating the preparation of their entering students in a given reading skill in the top half of the scale⁴

In math, the survey showed that many teachers are resisting the common core's layout of topics. The study found that more than 85 percent of teachers in early elementary school are still teaching some math topics that are not included in the common core, such as recognizing small numbers of objects without counting, using ordinal numbers, and identifying and extending patterns.

The ACT study speculates that this could be because teachers feel students are unprepared for the demands of later math courses: One-third of the teachers reported that fewer than half their students had appropriate math knowledge and skills when they began the school year.

Another finding might also explain their reluctance to change what they're teaching: Fewer than 6 in 10 of elementary teachers, and less than half in middle and high school, said they thought the common core was a good reflection of college math expectations.

The survey of K-12 and college instructors, conducted every few years, included workforce supervisors and employees for the first time. And they made it clear that they place a high value on certain nonacademic skills sets.

Topping their list were acting honestly, sustaining effort, getting along with others, and maintaining composure. Since face-to-face communication is the dominant mode of communication in their workplaces, the supervisors and employees said, they value skills like conveying a knowledgeable and confident demeanor when presenting information, and presenting it in a local, organized way.

Take a look at this chart showing how various sets of skills and knowledge rate among the different groups surveyed. (These findings are in a **companion report**.)

Table 1. Percentages of ACT National Curriculum Survey 2016 Respondents (by Educational Level or Workforce Role) Reporting that Weakness in a Given Area Is Most Likely to Contribute to a Poor Outcome for a Student or Employee

Early Elementary		Late Elementary		Middle School		High School		College		Supervisors		Employees	
Area	%												
Content Knowledge	27	Content Knowledge	29	Content Knowledge	28	Critical Thinking	23	Study Skills	25	Content Knowledge	22	Content Knowledge	21
Critical Thinking	20	Critical Thinking	22	Critical Thinking	21	Content Knowledge	22	Conscientiousness	20	Conscientiousness	13	Conscientiousness	18
Speaking and Listening	11	Study Skills	13	Study Skills	15	Study Skills	16	Content Knowledge	19	Problem Solving	12	Technology	16
Conscientiousness	11	Problem Solving	13	Conscientiousness	15	Conscientiousness	15	Critical Thinking	19	Speaking and Listening	10	Speaking and Listening	13
Study Skills	10	Conscientiousness	13	Problem Solving	8	Writing	8	Writing	10	Collaboration with Peers	10	Critical Thinking	10
Problem Solving	8	Educational Plan	6	Writing	6	Problem Solving	8	Problem Solving	7	Technology	9	Educational Plan	6
Educational Plan	7	Writing	6	Educational Plan	5	Educational Plan	4	Educational Plan	2	Critical Thinking	8	Collaboration with Peers	6
Writing	5	Speaking and Listening	5	Technology	4	Speaking and Listening	3	Speaking and Listening	1	Educational Plan	7	Problem Solving	5
Technology	4	Technology	5	Speaking and Listening	4	Technology	3	Technology	1	Writing	4	Writing	3
Collaboration with Peers	3	Collaboration with Peers	3	Collaboration with Peers	2	Collaboration with Peers	2	Collaboration with Peers	1	Study Skills	3	Study Skills	1

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number; skill areas with identical percentages in a column were ranked according to their non-rounded values. Colors identify the nine unique skill areas appearing in the top halves of the rankings.

The curriculum survey, which ACT uses to shape the content of its tests, was given to 9,266 participants, including elementary, middle school and high school teachers and college instructors in English, writing, math, reading and science as well as workforce supervisors and employees.

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