ISSUES&ANSWERS REL 2010–No. 094

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How prepared are students for college-level reading? Applying a Lexile®-based approach

Summary

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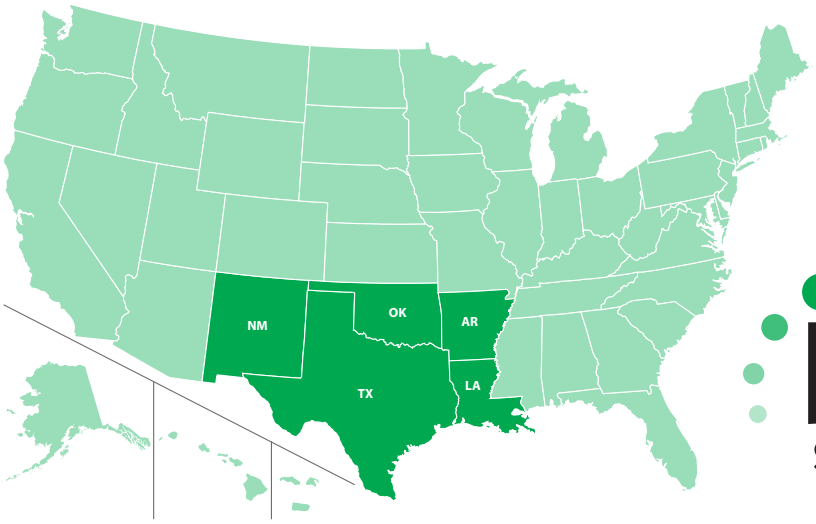

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Issues & Answers is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on current education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change to reflect new issues, as identified through lab outreach and requests for assistance from policymakers and educators at state and local levels and from communities, businesses, parents, families, and youth. All Issues & Answers reports meet Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research.

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This report is available on the regional educational laboratory web site at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

DISCLAIMER

The Lexile Framework® for Reading (a propriety system developed by MetaMetrics, Inc. for matching readers with texts of the appropriate level of difficulty) was used in this study to link student outcome data (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) with entry-level college English textbooks. As part of normal business practices, MetaMetrics, Inc. provided Lexile measures for the college textbooks selected for this study; MetaMetrics, Inc. was not involved in the study design, analysis, or report. Although Edvance Research, Inc., believes Lexiles to be a valid measure for this study, it has no direct relationship with MetaMetrics, Inc. and takes no position on the utility of the Lexile Framework relative to other measures. Edvance Research, Inc., has no financial interest in MetaMetrics, Inc., or in the use of the Lexile Framework.

Summary

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How prepared are students for college English courses? Applying a Lexile®-based approach

This study develops and applies a new methodology to determine the proportion of grade 11 students whose scores on a Texas English language arts and reading assessment indicate their readiness to read and comprehend textbooks used in entry-level English courses in the University of Texas system.

Despite recent national- and state-level legislative initiatives focusing on postsecondary success and an increasing emphasis on educational attainment to successfully enter the job market, high rates of enrollment in remedial college courses indicate that many students are graduating from high school unprepared for college-level work (Strong American Schools 2008; Terry 2007). Studies of reading materials required in the workplace (such as employment applications and job training materials) also suggest that students entering the workforce may be graduating from high school unprepared (Williamson 2004).

This study develops and documents a new methodology that uses the Lexile Framework® for Reading to determine the proportion of grade 11 Texas public school students whose scores on the exit-level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for English language arts and reading (TAKS–ELAR) or the TAKS–ELAR Accommodated indicate the ability to read and comprehend textbooks used in entry-level (freshman) English courses in the University of Texas system.

The Lexile Framework for Reading matches readers with texts of the appropriate level of difficulty (Lennon and Burdick 2004). Developed by MetaMetrics, Inc. (White and Clement 2001), the Lexile framework is a linguistic theory–based method for measuring the reading difficulty of prose texts and the reading capacity of students. It uses sentence length and word frequency to assign reading difficulty values to passages of text. The values are reported on a Lexile scale that ranges from 0L (for emerging readers and beginning texts) to 1700L (for advanced readers and texts). The scale unit (a standardized metric for presenting scores on a measure) is called a Lexile (L). The Lexile Framework can also be used to assign a measure to a student's reading ability (based on reading comprehension) and then calculate the Lexile measure of texts the student is likely to read with 75 percent comprehension. Lexiles are regularly used in K–12 classrooms to ensure that students are reading books at an appropriate level of difficulty based on their level of reading comprehension.

The findings show that at the 75 percent comprehension level, 51 percent of students can read 95 percent of first-year English textbooks

used in entry-level classes in the University of Texas system, 80 percent can read 50 percent of the textbooks, and 9 percent can read no more than 5 percent of the textbooks.

The study demonstrates that the methodology developed and documented in this report can be applied in a real-world context. Providing policymakers with information about the proportion of high school students who are prepared to read entry-level college material at the University of Texas system can help policymakers evaluate and understand the effectiveness of efforts to align high school curriculum and instruction with requirements for postsecondary success.

Because the methodology uses the Lexile Framework, the link between students and textbooks provides information only on reading comprehension. The results do not apply to broader aspects of college readiness or address more specific reading skills such as vocabulary knowledge or use of contextual cues. In addition, the methodology is limited to examining books that can be assigned a Lexile measure (this excludes books with less than 50 percent prose). The findings of this study apply only to the population of grade 11 Texas public school students who took the April 2009 exit-level TAKS–ELAR or TAKS–ELAR Accommodated and to textbooks used in entry-level English courses in the University of Texas system.

In addition, because only aggregated student summary data were used, findings cannot be differentiated by student groups, such as those planning to attend the University of Texas system and those planning to attend other colleges or to enter the workforce. However, the methodology documented in this report could be used in future studies to determine how prepared a particular group of individuals is to read at a given level.

The study extends the technical assistance work conducted in 2007 in response to a request from the Commission for a College Ready Texas to assess college readiness among high school graduates in Texas. The new methodology developed in the current study can be applied in other settings as well.

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