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Standards for Student Performance

By Kelly Markham

Ten years ago, the release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform,* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, triggered a decade-long push to upgrade the quality of American schools at all levels. Other, less dramatic reports followed, sounding similar themes and prompting calls for reform based in higher standards.

Educators in the various disciplines have already begun setting standards. In 1989, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics published *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics,* and more than forty states have begun revising their curricula to reflect the standards it sets forth. Assessment standards are expected in 1994-95.

Mathematics educators, among the first to develop curriculum standards, appear better able to achieve consensus about what students must know than, for example, social studies teachers who are struggling with questions of multiculturalism in curricula. Nevertheless, standards developed by the National Task Force on Social Studies Standards are expected to be ready late this year. Final documents on standards for English, science, and the arts are expected as early as 1994.

Although all these efforts attempt to delineate the knowledge and skills students should acquire, the specificity of curriculum standards varies across subjects.

Why Are Standards Used in the Past Now Inadequate?

Historically, American schools have been committed to conducting specified educational processes, not to producing outcomes (Conley 1993). The use of Carnegie units in education emphasizes "seat time" rather than students' actual knowledge. O'Neil (1991) argues that time spent in the classroom and minimum competence as reflected on standardized tests must be replaced with better indicators of students' accomplishments.

Too often it is only the best students who are motivated by traditional assessment tools--test scores and grades--and even these students may be doing less work for their high marks. In many cases, grade inflation has made the letter grades A and B easier to come by.

Lax standards in both high schools and universities may feed on each other, allowing some students to coast through high school and still go on to further education (Welsh 1992). Becker and Rosen (1992) note that financial aid is granted with little attention given to academic performance. Noncollege-bound

students, too, sometimes find little incentive to work hard and take difficult courses because they see no correlation between high marks and getting good jobs.

Many educators believe that if we are serious about reforming our education system, schools must implement high standards for student achievement that stress performance. In focusing on performance, standards are a means of translating broad visions of improvement into more specific parameters for outcomes. Expected outcomes encourage students to strive for higher levels of achievement and provide a benchmark for measuring the success of reform efforts.

What Form Should Standards Take?

Nationwide tests similar to those used in Japan, with achievement goals and local comparisons, may not be an effective means of establishing standards for performance in the U.S. Such testing would neither indicate why a student performed poorly in a particular area, nor necessarily provide accurate feedback for evaluating teaching methods. Further, some observers caution that national testing would undermine local control over curriculum, and teachers would be forced into "teaching for the test."

While there is some disagreement over what form standards should take, there is consensus that expectations for achievement should cut across subject areas and support active learning and critical thinking, not memorization. Standards should be based on what is truly important for students to know, not what is easiest to assess. They are more appropriately thought of as criteria for performance that encourage intellectual vitality than as fixed and uniform goals. Standards should emphasize that attitudes toward education are as important as what is taught.

Conley says that standards should reflect the minimum expectations society holds for schools and should have both content and process-related components. The content component reflects mastery of the information base of a recognized discipline or body of knowledge. The process component describes an intellectual process consisting of attitudes, behaviors, and skills that may be applied to a wide variety of content in the processing of information. Schools should have appropriate methods for evaluating both components.

Some schools have gone beyond traditional testing procedures, adopting innovative forms of assessment such as portfolio reviews of past work, projects, and performance evaluations by graduation committees, which may better reflect what a student has learned than examinations (Ravitch 1992).

One lesson American schools may learn from the Japanese is the importance of emphasizing effort rather than natural ability. In Japan, success is viewed as a function of hard work, not a function of scholastic "talent." Those who fail do so because they did not apply themselves, not because they are incompetent "Can We Win the Brain Race with the Japanese" 1991). In the U.S., some students are identified as "gifted"; others are presumably "ungifted"; and standards for achievement vary accordingly. Welsh argues that standards should be developed that stress effort as the key ingredient for success for all students.

Who Should Create Standards?

Part of the difficulty in devising standards for performance is deciding who will participate in creating them and how they will be implemented. Should standards be developed by an "objective" group of experts? The short answer is no. Schools are accountable to all of us, and the development and implementation of standards should be a communal process involving many voices (Sizer and Roger 1993).

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) urges parents, educators, representatives of higher education and business as well as school boards to participate in deciding what the core values of the school as an educational institution are. Districts should solicit input that reflects the racial and ethnic makeup of the community to ensure that cultural diversity is not lost. To this end, it is important that members of the local community be supplied with the information and tools they need to examine their education system critically (Education Commission of the States 1992). Reports released by organizations outside the local educational community, such as the America 2000 goals (now Goals 2000) and the 1991 report of the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Schools, may also be helpful. Such reports reflect not only educational goals different communities pursue, they also emphasize aspects of education generally valued by society at large (Conley).

How Should Standards Be Implemented?

The ECS argues that although standards adopted at the state and national levels may provide useful guidelines, these should be tailored to local reform efforts. Standards should be broad enough to allow teachers flexibility in their practical application in the classroom; they should assist in defining curriculum without stifling creative teaching methods. Mechanisms for receiving input from both the public and educational professionals at the state, district, and school levels should be built into the implementation process (ECS).

Implementation must also take into consideration issues of financing, class size, and the condition of educational facilities. Further, educators may require additional training as traditional teaching methods give way to new modes of learning. Students should not be held to higher standards until the resources are in place to facilitate such achievement. It is also important to remember that developing standards is not a one-time undertaking but is a dynamic, self-renewing process. Changing American schools to reflect higher standards will not happen over night. It is the result of persistent effort over time.

How Do Standards Benefit Students?

While some view setting high standards as elitist, most educators believe that adopting such standards is the guarantor of excellence and equity in education. Standards tell students, "We respect you, and are confident that you can learn" (Ravitch). When standards are institutionalized across the education system, poor students are given the same educational opportunities as their more affluent counterparts.

There is ample evidence to suggest that when students are encouraged to work with challenging content under optimum teaching and learning conditions, they will make far greater progress than those students who receive basic skills instruction (Commission on Chapter 1 1993). Standards that assume all students can learn more and can learn at high levels guard against the self-fulfilling prophecy of low achievement that low standards produce (Welsh). Further, standards are an effective defense against parental complacency that undermines student achievement. Adopting high standards and weaving them into the whole fabric of the education system provides a basis for implementing reforms and enables schools to reclaim their unique role of educating students.

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