

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management

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Research Roundup 17, 4 (Summer 2001)

The State of Standards

By Larry Lashway

Reform movements come and go, but the push for standards-based accountability shows little sign of weakening. All 50 states are moving toward accountability systems that involve setting clear standards of learning, assessing student progress on those standards, and providing a variety of incentives and sanctions for performance. Still, the movement's progress is far from uniform, with questions and doubts continuing to bubble to the surface.

Many educators remain profoundly ambivalent, recognizing opportunities for positive change but worrying that a narrow definition of standards and assessment will restrict their efforts to provide for the individual needs of students.

Parents, while they continue to express strong support for standards-based accountability, fear that standardized test scores will be the sole determinant of their children's future. Some parents and students have taken a stance of outright resistance to test-taking.

Policymakers in some states have recently begun to put the brakes on plans for linking high school graduation to test results.

The standards movement may be entering a stage in which its very success is causing hesitation. While few schools have been completely transformed, and the payoff in student achievement is still mostly in the future, standards are starting to change classroom practice, affect schools' reputations, and determine students' futures. As standards become institutionalized, the education community has become increasingly worried about adopting a system that has some troublesome features. While hardly anyone is advocating abandoning standards, many are expressing a need to step back and take stock.

This issue of *Research Roundup* captures some of the ferment by surveying a variety of current perspectives on standards:

Education Week takes a comprehensive look at the standards movement in its latest annual report, *Quality Counts 2001*.

The Learning First Alliance calls for "mid-course corrections" in standards-based accountability.

Chester E. Finn and Michael J. Petrilli update the Thomas Fordham Foundation's periodic evaluation of state efforts to implement standards.

Scott Thompson draws a line between the "authentic standards" movement and its "evil twin"--test-based reform.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning describes how teachers are implementing standards in the classroom.

Quality Counts 2001: A Better Balance. An *Education Week* Special Report, January 2001. \$10, quantity discounts available. Available from: *Education Week*, Suite 100, 6935 Arlington Rd., Bethesda, MD 20814-5233. 800-346-1834. Accessible online at <http://www.edweek.org/products/special-reports/specials.htm>.

Standards-based accountability has been driven by state-level policymakers, which means that the accountability "movement" is really 50 loosely coordinated movements. Keeping track of all this activity and discerning trends is no small task.

For the past several years, *Education Week* has fulfilled that role with its annual report, *Quality Counts*. The latest version, *Quality Counts 2001*, assesses the state of standards-based education, compiles accountability policies, and rates states on a number of criteria.

The theme that emerges is simply stated: "If states really want to improve teaching and learning, they must find a better balance among standards, tests, and the supports needed to do the job."

Some states, districts, and schools have made undeniable headway. Standards have been integrated into the daily curriculum, instructional methods are changing, and student test scores are going up. Yet many of the apparent changes may be superficial, and no one knows whether the test gains will hold up over time.

In the meantime, the steady march toward accountability is generating resistance, with the hottest debate centered on high-stakes testing. Increasingly, educators are taking aim at the idea of basing major decisions on a single indicator, particularly if the designated test is not well aligned with the standards. Many practitioners talk candidly about pressure to teach to the test and their fear that an overemphasis on testing will drive out parts of the curriculum, like music and the arts, that are not tested. Still others

note that performance expectations have been set without much research on student capabilities. And many teachers express a need for well-designed professional development focused on standards.

In addition to exploring these issues, *Quality Counts 2001* provides a comprehensive overview of state policies, with data on standards by subject and grade level, grade-by-grade testing practices, types of assessments, incentives, sanctions, and professional development efforts. There are also data on school climate, education funding, teacher quality, and equity.

Learning First Alliance. **Standards and Accountability: A Call by the Learning First Alliance for Mid-Course Corrections.** Washington, D.C.: Author, 2000. Free. Available from: Learning First Alliance, 1001 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 335, Washington, DC 20036. 202-296-5220. Accessible online at <http://www.learningfirst.org/news/standards.html>.

Standards-based accountability has always been driven by policymakers. Educators have been more ambivalent, publicly supporting higher standards but privately expressing concern about assessments and incentives. Now the Learning First Alliance, a broad-based coalition of mainstream professional organizations such as AASA, NEA, and NAESP, has voiced many of those concerns.

The Alliance emphasizes its support for standards-based accountability, saying that standards focus attention on student needs, provide feedback on program effectiveness, and communicate school priorities to the entire community. In the early stages of a highly ambitious effort, some states and districts have already used standards to improve achievement.

Despite these early successes, the complexity of standards-based reform threatens to send the movement off-track unless there is continuous review and monitoring. The Alliance's own analysis has identified some worrisome trends, leading it to call for "mid-course corrections." In particular, five issues need attention:

1. *Alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment.* Standards-based accountability breaks down when standards are not embedded in the curriculum and when assessments are not aligned to the standards.
2. *Adequate professional development for teachers and principals.* Teachers must not only be familiar with the new standards, they must develop a wider range of instructional strategies and learn to use assessment data to fine-tune their teaching. Higher standards require higher quality teaching that can only come from intensive and sustained professional development.
3. *Sufficient resources and support for each child to meet high standards.* Helping children—especially

those at risk—requires an investment in enriched curriculum, extended learning time, smaller class size, effective technology, and modern facilities.

4. *Communication about the importance of standards and accountability.* Community support is vital and it depends on a clear understanding of standards, necessary changes in instruction, and the meaning of test scores.

5. *Balanced and comprehensive accountability systems.* The major concern here is overemphasis on high-stakes testing. Test scores provide useful data, but should be only one of many factors in making educational policy or deciding children's futures.

Finn, Chester E., Jr., and Michael J. Petrilli (eds.). **The State of State Standards 2000.** Washington, D. C.: The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, January 2000. No charge. *Available from:* The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1627 K Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006. 888-823-7474. Accessible online at <http://www.edexcellence.net>.

The word "standard" implies high expectations, rigor, and significant academic achievement. But with 50 states designing their own systems, there are inevitably differences in emphasis, coverage, and quality. For that reason, organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers and the Council for Basic Education provide periodic ratings of state efforts.

This report comes from the Thomas Fordham Foundation, a research and advocacy organization that favors educational choice and is often critical of public schools. Not surprisingly, it takes the position that the new standards are not sufficiently rigorous.

While remaining generally critical (the overall grade given to states is C-), the current report finds encouragement in three trends. First, state standards are becoming more specific and measurable. Second, the standards are placing more emphasis on content, such as designating specific literary works that all children should read. Finally, the authors see less reliance on standards developed by professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which the foundation has often criticized as being shallow or driven by pedagogical fads.

Despite these trends, the foundation finds only five states that they consider to be on the "honor roll" for standards-based reform. Other states are evaluated under the categories of "Shaky Foundations," "Going Through the Motions," and "Irresponsible States" (the largest list).

In identifying the criteria used to rate the state standards, the authors give major consideration to clarity and logical organization. But they also deduct for the presence of features they find objectionable. For

example, English standards lose points if they ask students to relate literary experiences to their personal lives; math standards are downgraded if they place excessive reliance on calculators or overemphasize problem-solving.

Thompson, Scott. "**The Authentic Standards Movement and Its Evil Twin.**" *Phi Delta Kappan* 82: 5 (January 2001): 358-62. Available from: Phi Delta Kappan, PO Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789. 812-339-1156. Accessible online at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/ktho0101.htm>.

Principals working to implement standards-based education quickly recognize that it has two dimensions. On the one hand, the new standards are often academically rich, calling for all students to achieve high-level learning. On the other hand, standards are part of a bureaucratic system designed to provide evidence that students are learning, and to reward or sanction performance accordingly. Not surprisingly, the two dimensions can be hard to reconcile.

Scott Thompson characterizes the split as "authentic standards-based reform" vs. "high-stakes, standardized, test-based reform." Authentic reform aims at equity by enriching instruction for all students; test-based reform sabotages equity by using a single score to retain or deny diplomas to students. Thompson argues that test-based reform not only takes schools in the wrong direction, but inspires a backlash that undermines support for authentic standards. Because the two strategies are closely linked, authentic reform often gets blamed for the excesses of its "evil twin."

The danger is not just that the standards movement will run out of steam, but that an increasingly impatient public will turn to vouchers and home schooling, endangering the continued existence of the public education system. Authentic reform can inhibit privatization by demonstrating that the schools can deliver high-quality learning in an equitable way.

Thompson envisions a system that is accountable for results, but which uses a wide range of qualitative and quantitative indicators. He cites Rhode Island's accountability program, which uses the standards as a basis for intense study by outside teams of teachers, administrators, and parents.

Like other educators, Thompson sees standards as a promising tool for meeting the needs of students, but worries that those sound impulses may be overwhelmed by the high-stakes steamroller.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. **Noteworthy Perspectives on Implementing Standards-Based Education.** Aurora, Colo.: Author, 2000. \$5.00. Available from: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2550 S. Parker Road, Suite 500, Aurora, CO 80014-1678. 303-

337-0990. Accessible online at <http://www.mcrel.org/products/standards/implement.pdf> .

Whereas *Quality Counts 2001* provides a helpful overview of state policies, school leaders are more likely to be interested in how standards-based education operates at the classroom level. Standards policies provide only the framework; it will be up to principals and teachers to translate those policies into meaningful learning.

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), a leader in studying the implications of the standards movement, has issued a report that examines how standards are playing out in America's classrooms.

Some of the teachers interviewed appreciated standards because they provided greater focus to instructional planning or because the emphasis on goals empowered them to use a wider range of teaching methods. However, many other teachers voiced uncertainty about the benefits of standards or about what was expected of them. Interestingly, many teachers saw little reason to change, either because they viewed standards as just another fad or because they believed that standards are "nothing new."

A number of teachers also had reservations about the ability of all of their students to achieve the new standards, pointing to many barriers beyond their direct control. Assessment was the biggest concern, particularly where standards and assessment were misaligned (for example, if the standards called for problem-solving but the test was multiple-choice). The teachers were also concerned that overemphasis on testing would narrow the curriculum.

From a classroom perspective, the McREL report suggests that principals can facilitate the standards process in several ways:

- * Assert a positive, unwavering commitment to standards;
- * Adjust the pace of reform to ensure that teachers are not overwhelmed;
- * Provide opportunities for teacher learning;
- * Offer support when students don't meet the standards; and
- * Provide teachers with time and resources.

The authors note that teachers find it most helpful when principals simply ask them, "What do you need to get better?"

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