

Standards: A Limited Tool for Education Improvement

We can think of standards in two ways—as goals that guide instruction or requirements that must be met. In either case, the education standards currently being used in this country are neither worthy goals to follow nor sufficient requirements to provide a quality education for all students.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Recently, there has been much discussion among researchers and policymakers and in the media about the need for national standards and/or different state standards than those that are currently in place. Before any policy decisions are made on this important issue of standards, it's essential to clarify what we mean by standards and to take a look at the history of standards-based education.

What are standards?

When the standards movement gained momentum in the 1990s, three types of standards were being proposed: content standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn standards.

- **Content standards** would describe what students should know and be able to do. In other words, they would identify the skills and knowledge that students should acquire in the course of their schooling. These standards would be based on theories of content/discipline, human development, and pedagogy. They would stimulate public dialogue, and, as a result, they would be revisited and revised on a regular basis.
- **Performance standards** would indicate how students were meeting specified learning goals. No standardized test scores here but instead richer, more in-depth reviews of student achievement. Examples: reading and writing an essay on Harry Potter, solving a two-variable math problem, developing a reasoned position on federalism, reading a *New York Times* editorial and arguing against its thesis. As valid

indicators of learning, such standards would be reported and used in making educational decisions. The standards would be assessed at only a few grade levels so that educators could exercise creativity and flexibility in curriculum and instruction, and instruction would not be so closely tied to the tests.

- **Opportunity-to-learn standards** would indicate the resources—human, material, and time—needed by students in order to have the opportunity to achieve high performance standards.¹

As efforts to use standards as a focus of education improvement have emerged over the past 20 years—and as standards themselves have been used as a lever in state and federal policy—what these types of standards have come to mean is very different from the original intent. In addition, early in the standards-based reform movement, opportunity-to-learn standards generally were dropped from the design of accountability systems, leaving only content and performance standards that focused on students and teachers as the critical factors in education improvement. Policymakers found opportunity-to-learn standards difficult to measure; an added problem is that they implied accountability by policymakers (as well as educators), and that made policymakers nervous.

It's important to note here that some factors that affect students' opportunities to learn can, in fact, be measured accurately. Factors such as preschool and kindergarten enrollment, percentage of children with health insurance, spending on child care services, and parent education and employment levels all correlate with student achievement and make up reportable aspects of opportunity to learn.²

The status of state content standards

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, states are required to adopt content standards. These are statements of what knowledge and skills students need to acquire by the end of each grade of schooling. (You can find these state standards on state Department of Education Web sites.) Some states have developed their standards with the help of important stakeholders, such as teachers, while others are using consultants, then inviting feedback from teachers and the public that may or may not be taken into consideration before the standards are adopted.

Several groups, including Achieve, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and *Education Week*, have undertaken an evaluation of standards. Evaluations are based mainly on the specificity of the standards and their coverage of a content area. In April 2008, the AFT published an evaluation of state standards. Their criteria include the following:

- They should be detailed and explicit with little or no repetition and rooted firmly enough in the content of the subject area to lead to a common, knowledge-rich curriculum.
- They should contain particular content (listed in the report).
- They should be articulated for every grade from K–8 and by grade or course at the high school level.

The following were AFT's examples of weak and strong standards in English. The strong standard: "Distinguish between cause and effect and fact and opinion in informational text (Grade 4)." A weak standard: "Demonstrate an understanding that the purposes of experiencing literary works include personal satisfaction and development of lifelong literature appreciation."³

Some would say the specificity of the AFT preferred standard promotes learning of disconnected information and skills rather than deep understanding of content, but *Education Week* thought enough of AFT's evaluation of state standards to use it in its report card on state efforts at improving student achievement.

The question of what makes for a good content standard is an important one. The groups that have evaluated standards have no empirical evidence that their criteria are the correct criteria. Before proceeding with

further efforts to develop more standards at a state or national level, there should be a careful exploration of what types of standards lead to the best education for students. Specificity, a characteristic of guidelines for developing tests, has become the hallmark of valued content standards. However, if curriculum and instruction are guided by the need to acquire these bits of learning, then the opportunities for students to make connections across content and use creative and critical thinking will be limited.

It's important to note, however, that it is not content standards but rather *performance* standards that drive education in most states and districts.

The status of state performance standards

Content and performance standards were initially defined as separate entities, with content standards being broader, deeper, and more complex than performance standards. But over time, policymakers have promoted the idea that content standards must be measureable through test items, and as a result, content standards have come to serve the original purpose of performance standards.

Scores on the state assessments that determine whether students are below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced have essentially become state performance standards. The descriptions of the content and skills that test items address are usually part of the specifications that guide test development and thus frame performance standards. Today's content standards look more like the lists that describe item content on tests rather than broader, more complex goals for student learning that they were originally intended to be. This approach is reinforced by NCLB, which requires states to test every grade, every year. The frequent testing leads to relying on tests that are easy to develop and easy to score (and don't cost too much to develop). So these tests end up limiting performance standards to what can be measured mainly through multiple choice and short-answer questions rather than evaluating complex skills and higher-order thinking. The testing requirements also narrow the range of content standards because they end up being viewed as the substance of what will be tested rather than the broader goals of learning.

Do standards of any type improve student achievement?

This is a difficult question. The short answer is no—because there are no conclusive studies on whether having standards as a focus of teaching and learning improves student achievement. Over the last 20 years, states, districts, and schools have implemented many different but interconnected policies and programs to improve student achievement, and it's virtually impossible to separate the effects of standards from those of other interventions. Trend data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in reading for grade 4 does show that students made more progress during the initial years of standards-based education improvement (1994–2004) than between 1975 and 1994. But in the years after NCLB (2002–2007), the rate of increase dropped. While both time periods (1994–2004 and 2002–2007) focused on standards-based reform, before NCLB was implemented, most states only tested at three grades rather than at every grade level. An additional difference is that once NCLB-mandated testing went into effect, the stakes became much higher for states.⁴

What seemed to make a difference in the early years of standards-based education was the focus on curriculum and instruction in developing standards. So it's not surprising today that educators are deeply concerned that NCLB's prescriptive testing and accountability mandates are narrowing the curriculum. In fact, two Center on Education Policy (CEP) reports confirm that changes in the curriculum are not only widespread but deep⁵ and suggest that students may not be well served by this focus on standards that are in essence defined by standardized tests.

National content standards: not a solution

Concerned that content standards vary too much by state and that performance standards are not consistent across all states, some policymakers are calling for national content standards to address those differences. The real issue, however, is not the standards themselves but where states set the cut scores that determine whether students are advanced, proficient, basic, or below basic. In fact, two states could be using exactly the same standards and test, but by using different cut scores they could report different percentages of stu-

dents at each level. Content standards guide instruction; they do not determine achievement.

We already have a national assessment—the National Assessment of Education Progress—that lets us compare the percent of students found to be basic and proficient in each state relative to a national standard. National content standards would be both redundant and irrelevant, and it's not clear who would gain from an effort to implement common content standards. No research exists either to guide such an endeavor or to suggest that national content standards would improve student achievement.

Rather than investing more time and resources to develop more standards that look like those already in use, NEA believes we must focus instead on proven reform strategies that work, things such as reducing class size so that teachers can devote enough attention to each child; tutoring to ensure that those who fall behind aren't left behind, and actively involving parents and the community. What would also have a significant impact on student achievement, greater than any kind of national standards, would be to address the social and economic well-being of children so that all students come to school ready and able to learn. Such efforts could put us on a par in terms of opportunity to learn with countries whose students outperform ours in international studies.

In fact, a growing number of researchers and policymakers are expanding the dialogue on education reform, and a consensus is starting to emerge that improving education requires not only deciding what to teach but also committing to the overall well-being of children. The Campaign for the Whole Child, initiated by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, is one effort to draw attention to issues beyond content and performance standards that impact student learning. The ASCD campaign notes that access to health care, improved nutrition, quality early child care and education, and safe environments are all essential ingredients for educational excellence. In addition, a task force of national policy experts with diverse religious and political affiliations, in public policy fields such as education, social welfare, health, housing, and civil rights, has launched a campaign calling for a "Broader, Bolder Approach to Education" to break a decades-long cycle of education reforms that have promised much but achieved far too little.⁶

NEA believes every child deserves a great public school, and that school improvement efforts must be guided by broader goals for education. We believe that just as teachers and schools must be held accountable for student learning, so too must policymakers be held accountable for providing for students' well-being. We believe that education goals must promote deep understandings, and instructional goals must emphasize more than test performance. NEA believes that content standards and performance standards must be put into the larger context of providing the best access to learning as possible for our students.

References

¹ Smith, Marshall S., *The Rise of State Standards-based Reforms*, presented at a symposium, *The States' Impact on Federal Education Policy: New Perspectives on Research and the Historical Record*. Presentation available on www.sifepp.org.

Resources

Papers from the symposium on *The States' Impact on Federal Education Policy, New Perspectives on Research and the Historical Record*.

www.sifepp.org

Center on Education Policy. Check out their analyses of policy and education trends.

www.cep-dc.org

Education Week, Back issues of *Quality Counts*. These are summaries of education data and trends.

² Education Week, *From Cradle to Career*, Vol. 26, Number 17, January 2007.

³ American Federation of Teachers, *Sizing Up State Standards 2008*, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/standards2008.pdf.

⁴ Smith, *ibid*.

⁵ CEP reports: *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era*, July 2007, www.cepdc.org/_data/n_0001/resources/live/Curriculum%20Release%20Final.pdf; and *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects*, February 2008, www.cepdc.org/_data/n_0001/resources/live/InstructionalTimeNewsReleaseFeb2008.pdf.

⁶ Economic Policy Institute, *A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education*, www.boldapproach.org.