

Can Standards Improve Schools?

Written by the MetLife Fellows in the Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI)

Words 852

For decades, educators, politicians and the public-at-large have debated how best to teach our children. Today, a consensus has emerged among various competing interests, and this new spirit of agreement revolves around learning standards. The standards were created for the purpose of ensuring that *all* students receive a high-quality education. By meeting standards, this line of reasoning suggests, all children will receive a comprehensive, well-rounded education that will foster their productive participation in American society. But what if standards are not the answer to inequities in education? What if the meaning and power of standards have been misconstrued? Let's examine what standards are and how they are being used.

Do standards measure learning?

In the world of education, "standards" fall into two categories: content standards (curriculum--what students should learn) and performance standards (assessment--proof that students have learned the required curriculum). The media, politicians, and the public at large tend to focus on the latter--assessment. Why? Largely because of "high-stakes" testing, a key component of the federally mandated No Child Left Behind Act, that emphasizes only the bottom line, i.e., a single test to measure how much our students know and can do. Any researcher will tell you that a single instrument can never fully explain a result just as any skillful educator will tell you that a single test can never adequately measure a student's knowledge and ability. A strong assessment system focuses on what students are actually learning in the classroom, on student progress, and what and how teachers are actually teaching.

Every subject area boasts its own set of national standards, each developed collaboratively by content experts and teachers in the field. Forty-nine states (all except Iowa) have adopted standards as well. Often these are based on national guidelines. Some local districts have further developed their own. Content standards serve as a guide for what teachers should teach, and what children need to know at every grade level.

Thus, both content standards and performance standards are critical to the whole picture of learning. We need to strike a balance between the process (content standards) and the product (performance standards), and we need to interpret high-stakes test results as only *one* measure of how well students are achieving the goals set forth in the standards.

Standards are not the same as tests. Employing standardized tests to assess how well students are meeting the standards will not guarantee that the standards are being used and that students are learning with the breadth and depth called for by the standards. Standardized tests generally go after a very limited part of the curriculum and often very low levels of thinking (as MetLife Fellow Janet Price and other TNPI researchers have shown).

If we want to measure learning relative to standards, an accountability structure for meeting the standards must be put in place that reaches beyond state/national-mandated assessments, especially for non-tested areas. This accountability structure should include student portfolios and teacher records.

What is the problem?

It would seem simple that if the state provides teachers with curriculum guidelines, they will read them, understand them, and implement them. However, this is not the case. Implementing the standards is much more complex than distributing huge notebooks of curriculum requirements. Teachers must receive adequate professional development to effectively incorporate the standards in their daily lessons.

According to the Education Commission of the States, the use of standards varies widely from classroom to classroom and from school to school. Many teachers are facing significant challenges in implementing math, science, and literacy standards in their classrooms. These range from lack of standards-based resources to lack of training.

How to ensure that every child reaches high standards ?

The current standards movement assumes that there is an equality of educational resources for all students—that all students have equal access to a rigorous curriculum and highly trained teachers, and are held to high expectations. However, there are staggering inequities between poor

and wealthy schools, as evidenced by legal challenges being waged in courtrooms around the country.

Teacher expertise is the single most important factor in student learning. However, when compared to those in other countries, teachers in the United States have the least amount of time to plan, work with colleagues, and pursue professional development opportunities in order to deepen their understanding of teaching. Research shows that states that have demonstrated the greatest improvements in student achievement have invested most in their teachers' professional development.

Students and parents also play an integral part in reaching standards. Standards should be clear enough and disseminated widely enough to ensure ample opportunities for students and their families to understand what students should know and be able to do. This is why school systems that publish and distribute booklets setting forth the standards for subjects at every grade level have greater success at meeting standards.

Standards will only improve education if we use them properly, equip teachers to make the most of them, and provide the resources necessary for all children to learn. In order to address the challenges of implementing standards, a dialogue is necessary among educators, politicians, and the public-at-large.