

Finishing the Race

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Those who have been running the standards race must persevere and complete the journey toward excellence and equity for our students.

Every marathon runner knows the feeling. At the starting gate, the crowds are cheering and you feel invincible. A few miles down the road, the supportive crowds have thinned but your determination is unabated. As those who drop out of the race pass in the bus taking the injured and unprepared to the finish line, you avert your glance - you, after all, are in this race to finish.

But now it's the 20th mile in a 26-mile race. This is the point at which the external encouragement has evaporated, along with your reserves of energy. If those reserves are too depleted, you "hit the wall" and have no option but to withdraw. There is a nagging voice that calls out, "Is this really worth the effort?" But the well-prepared runner has enough reserve to gain a second wind, a source of energy that inexplicably kicks in when others are quitting. While the second wind doesn't propel you through those final miles free of pain and anxiety, it does make it possible to finish the race.

The standards movement is approaching the 20th mile. Many school leaders and state policymakers are ready to take the bus back to mediocrity. The cheers that accompanied the birth of the standards movement have turned to cynicism and personal attacks, leaving those educators still engaged in the attempt to apply high standards and create exceptional learning opportunities for all of their students to wonder, "Is this really worth the effort?"

Some educators and leaders will heed the siren call to quit the race. "After all," they reason, "we did standards last year. Now let's try something new!" This article is an appeal to those who have been running the standards race to persevere and complete the journey toward excellence and equity.

The road ahead includes a chorus of criticism, negativism, and assurances that you are attempting the impossible. You will not cross the finish line in comfort or without pain, but you can finish. The satisfaction of doing so will not only provide deep fulfillment for you and your colleagues, but it will profoundly influence the lives of the students you serve.

After the pep rally

The standards movement is stalled in a predictable moment of self-doubt. The birth of the movement happened in an atmosphere similar to the opening of school. The cheerleaders included not only those students leading vigorous exhortations from the crowd, but board members, parents, and even cynical faculty members joining the chorus of enthusiasm for their school. The entire crowd exuded confidence that we were important people doing vital jobs. Within a few months, the voices of encouragement turned to second-guessing:

"We gave you the standards and the students still aren't achieving - why can't you just do your jobs?"

"The state test tells the story - you just aren't doing what you're supposed to do."

"We've invested lots of time and resources in standards, staff development, and curriculum alignment. If students aren't achieving, then it's the teacher's fault."

These accusations lead to equally destructive responses:

"There's nothing we can do if the kids are poor, don't speak English, and are unmotivated."

"The standards and curriculum are fine, but the textbooks we use have nothing to do with the standards."

"The state test is discriminatory and invalid. Besides, there are a lot of important things that go on around this school that don't show up on test scores."

In this atmosphere of anger and contention, the cheerleaders are silent and the band no longer plays. In the faculty meetings, staff development sessions, and leadership forums, a desolate, lonely, and threatening mood prevails. Posturing has overtaken strategy; excuses outstrip confidence.

If we are to finish the race, then we need to analyze what happened and what we can do about it. Quick fixes or facile advice won't work. As we struggle through the 20th mile, caught between the voices of second-guessing administrators and the chorus of pundits who claim that their quest is impossible, we do not need a pep talk or an amusing story; we need solid advice on how to finish the race we have started.

Proliferation and promiscuity

One of the great things about running is that you get to eat pasta. Unfortunately, some people believe the more you eat, the better a runner you will be. Only after they are overly full do they recognize that the food that might have been helpful in a limited quantity is a liability when consumed in abundance.

The promise of standards started with simple appeals to fairness and reason. Tell the students what we expect, and they have a better opportunity to achieve it. Tell teachers in adjacent grade levels what we expect, and their coordination will lead to more focused curriculum. Tell the testing companies what we expect, and their assessments will be more fair and valid. As standards advocates staggered to the buffet for multiple helpings, the promise of precision yielded to undifferentiated bulk.

While a few voices of reason (Popham, 1997) warned that many standards lacked clarity and descriptive rigor, other voices lauded the trend toward standards that were distinguished principally by their girth. If "mathematical problem solving" didn't tell you what we needed, then list the seven polygons sixth-graders should recognize. Only after the standards floodgates had burst open did cooler heads (Marzano and Kendall, 1999) prevail and note that even if the proliferation of standards were a wise educational strategy, almost twice as many years would be needed in students' school careers to teach such prolific standards.

Publishers jumped at the opportunity to assure districts that their textbooks were "standards-based," meaning there was some link, however tenuous, between the growing contents of their books and the standards. A new generation of "Prego" textbooks arrived on the scene: Whatever any state standards committee could conceive, the textbook salespeople could assert, "It's in there!"

The backlash

Taking aim at an easy target, opponents of standards found an eager audience. Unfortunately, the critics confuse an appropriate attack on bad standards with an unwarranted attack on the entire standards movement. Rather than a pursuit of fairness and clarity in education, the entire standards movement was a fraud and deceit perpetrated for sinister reasons by unscrupulous

people.

With vitriol reminiscent of the wars between phonics and whole language, the partisans of both sides conducted furious exchanges. At first, the exchanges were amusing. Defenders of standards were said to display "stunning ignorance" (Darling-Hammond, 1997) while standards critics were dismissed as more "educrats" (Sykes, 1995).

But amusement was quickly replaced by the disgust that sets in when a respectful intellectual exchange turns into a barroom brawl. The losers, of course, are not the authors and speakers who revel in every rhetorical counter-punch, but teachers, administrators, students, and parents who watch one more educational idea go down in flames because the adults discussing the issue lack the deportment necessary to conduct a civil conversation.

Ironically, the advocates of both extremes claim to represent the best interest of students, but the impact of their inflammatory rhetoric has precisely the opposite impact. The defenders of standards as they now exist confuse the mantra "All children can learn" with the absurd notion that all students learn in the same way and at the same pace. They confuse standards with standardization.

The critics of standards unwittingly fuel the flames of gender and ethnic stereotypes when they blithely assume that students (typically those who are poor or minorities) are incapable of improved academic performance. The defenders of standards underestimate the differences among children, while the critics of standards mislabel differences in learning pace as differences in ability.

The turning point

School and state policymakers have invested energy, resources, emotion, and time in identifying what students should know and be able to do. That few of them have done the job well is not justification for abandoning the standards movement.

Disappointment, frustration, and anger are all understandable emotions. Great teachers and leaders anticipate such reactions from their students and confess to experiencing the same emotions. Great teachers and leaders also understand that acknowledging frustration is not the same as succumbing to it. They can challenge state standards that are either excessively vague or hyper-specific without condemning the standards movement to the rubbish pile, just as they can see a spark of accomplishment in the uncompleted work of a student.

The moment of truth for great teachers and leaders comes not amidst angry attacks on imaginary demons, but in the never-ending quest for the good, the fair, and the just. Rejecting the simplicity of the "devils vs. angels" debate, great teachers and leaders risk the ridicule of both sides by seeking to make standards work (Reeves, 1997, 2000).

From heat to light

I do not expect to quell the passion of either extreme in the standards debate. Instead, let me offer some advice to those who wish to choose reality over rhetoric and achievement over animosity. To the advocates of standards:

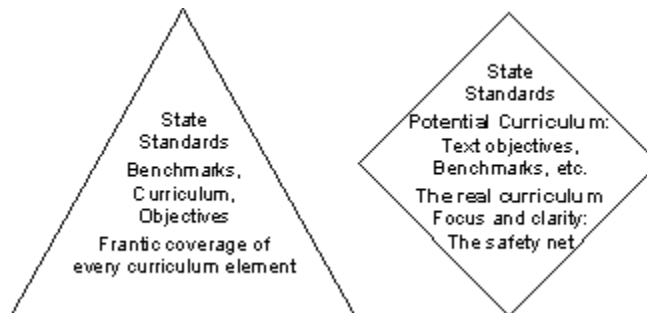
1. **Make realistic claims.** Stop telling teachers that "standards will make your job easy" when in fact nothing will make this incredibly challenging profession easy. Offer instead the realistic prospect that effective standards offer a clear, focused and limited curriculum that balances high expectations for every student with realistic differences in pace and methods.
2. **Change the standards model.** The original content standards seemed reasonable, but as we have added performance standards, benchmarks, learning expectations, test

objectives, and curriculum, the crush on the classroom teacher is oppressive. In order to cross the chasm from mind-numbing quantity to a focused curriculum, it is necessary to change the standards model from a triangle to a diamond. (example to follow).

3. **Improve the quality and relevance of standards-based assessments.** In many schools that claim to adhere to standards, there is a widening gap between the expectations expressed in standards and the reality of annual assessments. Even if we accept the debatable proposition that state assessments are linked to state standards, the feedback that is provided from such annual exams is neither timely nor relevant. Effective standards advocates should place state tests in proper context - as a small part of the comprehensive standards assessment system. By far the most important part of that system is in the classroom assessments that are performed for the central purposes of feedback and improved achievement.

To the critics of standards:

1. **Lighten up!** You made your point. Standards (and textbooks and state testing programs) would be better if their proponents distinguished between minutiae and knowledge, between information and understanding. You can be the force of good, becoming powerful advocates for clarity, specificity, and value in standards. It might advance the cause of reason if you would acknowledge that it is possible to disagree with you and still care deeply about the children we serve.
2. **Help build the catalog of best practices of great teachers.** The critics of standards rightly defend the work of creative teachers who frequently operate under challenging circumstances. Rather than retreat to the claim that leaders should simply leave such teachers alone and let them teacher, the critics should recognize exemplary teachers. Their techniques can be a model and an inspiration for the next generation entering this profession.



The role of the leader

School leaders at all levels would be wise to bring to the table the advocates and critics of standards and find the middle ground. Acknowledge the errors, focus on the possible, and embrace the possibility that high expectations for all students will break the barriers of cynicism and despair. Ask the veteran teachers in your schools which educational principals have transcended politics and fads and endured over the decades. In many conversations with many such veteran educators, a common theme emerges: If the standards movement is to make a positive difference for children and schools, it must pass the fundamental tests of fairness and effectiveness.

Leaders must also be steadfast in their fight against state documents that are unfocused and unrelated to assessments. Leaders must be equally firm in their resolve to maintain a climate of reason and common values, rejecting histrionics and personal attacks. Leaders who provide the second wind of the standards movement will do so with clarity, focus, commitment, and above all, the perseverance that is required to finish the race.