Take back the standards: A modest proposal for a quiet revolution

By Douglas B. Reeves

The criticisms of academic standards are well established. Some states have established standards that are too voluminous, too specific, not specific enough, and most of all, linked to the tests that critics love to hate.

Teachers and administrators alike spontaneously offer as established truth that the standards movement is responsible for the destruction of creativity in the classroom, a regimen of "drill and kill" throughout the land, and the transformation of formerly good educators into automatons. By such logic, one must be a bad teacher in order to have good test scores, and good teachers are doomed to produce low test scores.

Presented in such stark terms, the choice appears to be that we either enter a brave new world of standards that would make Huxley blush or join the clarion call to "just leave me alone and let me teach!"

There is another alternative. By taking back the standards, educators and school leaders can acknowledge the weaknesses of standards in their present form and, at the same time, remain committed to the fundamental principles that separate standards-based education from the bell curve.

Why standards? The forgotten argument

In the widely published criticisms of standards, the implication is that the alternative is educational Nirvana, in which blissful children are guided by teachers who intuitively know the most important academic content, respond to their individual needs, and prepare students for the next level of instruction — a level where, presumably, teachers are also pursuing their own idea of what is most important for students to learn.

Whatever the flaws of standards, let us remember that the alternative is not perfection. To put a fine point on it, there are only two ways to evaluate student performance. We can either compare students to an objective and clear standard, or we can compare students to each other.

The former alternative, however imperfect, provides a consistent basis for assessment and a rational foundation for curriculum. Without standards, teachers and administrators compare students to one another and thereby institutionalize the bell curve. That brings us back to a world of bluebirds, robins and black birds, the choices of color hardly coincidental.

It's not as bad as all that — it's worse. In the absence of academic standards, the world of the bell curve has a doubly pernicious impact. Students in a disadvantaged environment are assured that they are doing just fine, even if their literacy skills are insufficient to provide opportunities in the future.

"They're just doing the best they can," I am assured, "considering where they came from." Meanwhile, advantaged students receive challenges and

opportunities that are systematically denied to children of poverty an children of color.

Standards, by contrast, create a level playing field in which expectations are consistent. While we can argue about whether or not fifth grade students should be able to write a five-paragraph essay, draw a two-dimensional scale model or understand the relationship of consumer choices and environmental impact, at the very least we can agree that these expectations should not vary based on the color of the child's skin or the bottom line of the parent's tax return.

When the same children are playing on the playground or football field, we demand consistency and fairness. We should expect no less in the academic classroom. Thus at the very core of the standards movement is a desire for fairness — the same expectations for all students. Has the execution of that ideal been perfect? Hardly. But improvement is a better alternative than abandonment.

Essential reforms: How to take back the standards

At this writing, standards have been established in all 50 states, either at the state or district level. That represents substantial progress from a decade ago, in which the dogma of "local control" was frequently a code word for those school systems that wished to preserve the ability to expect less of some children based on their economic status or ethnic identity. Nevertheless, standards in their present form can be improved by three reforms.

Use multiple assessments

First, change from one-shot testing to multiple assessments. While it is true that the nation is over-tested, we are under-assessed. The distinction is clear. Testing provides an end-of-year evaluation, with feedback delivered too late for use in the classroom. Assessment, by contrast, can be provided at the school and classroom level throughout the year, accompanied by immediate feedback and accompanying improvements in teaching and learning.

There is not a syllable in the new federal legislation, No Child Left Behind, that requires states to enrich corporate test developers. Rather, each state may develop its own testing system.

Nebraska has, wisely, devoted its resources to teacher-created and teacher-scored assessments at the district level. Contrary to popular myth, the U.S. Department of Education has yet to deploy Black Hawk helicopters to drop federal reading and math tests on the students of Omaha. The federal legislation explicitly grants to each state the ability to test students in reading and mathematics using its own standards and assessment system. If states fail to use the flexibility in the federal law, it is the fault of the state, not the federal government.

Ideally, each state would create an assessment system that is flexible, teacher-created, teacher-scored and useful for immediate feedback in the classroom. Rather than rely on a single test, teachers would have multiple assessments on

which to base the final judgment about the degree to which a student meets or fails to meet standards.

Expand accountability

Second, expand accountability beyond test scores. Only real estate agents and state legislators without school-age children believe in the equivalence between accountability and test scores.

In business, there is a story behind the numbers. We need no better example than Enron to remind us that the "score" — stock price and earnings — can be illusory. Legions of investors wish that they had a comprehensive view of that corporation's performance, rather than the superficiality of a few numbers.

In order to avoid an "Educational Enron" we must provide a holistic accountability system that includes not only test scores, but also the indicators of leadership, curriculum and teaching that provide measurable reflections of the antecedents of student performance.

Create power standards

Third, create power standards. Every state creates standards based on a political process. The word "political" is not uttered with a sneer, but rather is a reflection of a sincere desire by state officials to include multiple points of view in the creation of standards.

Unfortunately, in the absence of a 400-day school year, the inclusive ideal of state standards must give way to reality. That means that each district or school must create power standards in which they identify that small subset of state standards that meet three criteria:

1. Power standards possess endurance — they will be important more than a nanosecond after the latest state test has been completed.

2. Power standards have leverage — they are useful in multiple disciplines. Nonfiction writing is my favorite example here.

3. Power standards are required for the next level of learning. Ask teachers the question, "What are you willing to give up?" and the typical answer is "Nothing — everything I do is important." But ask teachers, "What advice would you give to the teachers in the next lower grade about the knowledge and skills that are most important for students who will come to your class next year?" and the responses are brief indeed.

From Washington to Camarillo

The blood sport in school systems across the land is to aim rhetorical stilettos at the administration and members of Congress, 90 percent of whom voted for the federal legislation that is now so widely reviled.

The most appropriate response by educators and school leaders is to use the flexibility that the law provides to make standards work, to use assessment wisely, to broaden accountability, and to change a potentially destructive system

of accountability and standards into a constructive system that focuses on improved teaching, learning, excellence and equity.

There are school systems in California and across the land that are already doing this. We should emulate their example.

Will the real standards-based education please stand up?

By Ron Brandt

America's public schools are firmly committed to standards-based education. Is this commitment entirely sound, or are some aspects of it questionable? The editor of *Leadership* invited Doug Reeves and me to explore any disagreements we may have.

First let's clarify the topic. The many meanings of "standards-based" education include:

• **Standardization of what is to be taught and learned.** In the last decade, numerous state and national groups have carefully defined what they think students should know and be able to do, and nearly all states have adopted these "content standards." At their best, these standards convey our professional vision of good teaching and learning.

• **Instruction that is clearly focused on what students are supposed to learn.** In standards-based classrooms, both teacher and students know what is expected, teaching strategies are appropriate to the standards being taught, and assessment provisions (determined *before* instruction) are focused on whether the standards have been met.

• **The expectation that all students are to learn the specified content at acceptable levels.** More than two decades of research and thought have established that difficult-to-teach students will achieve if teachers believe in them, demonstrate their beliefs, and use research-based practices.

• **Tests intended to assess the content standards.** Because standards are considered relatively meaningless unless externally measured, nearly all states require tests designed to provide an objective assessment of how well the standards have been learned.

• **Accountability provisions based on scores on the tests.** State and national policies now provide incentives and interventions intended to ensure more uniform achievement.

Each of these aspects of standards has its benefits and drawbacks.

Curriculum standards

Because most standards express worthy aspirations, people often say, "The standards are fine. It's how they're used that's the problem." Well, not entirely. For example, as the California mathematics standards illustrate, the adoption process is highly political, allowing ideologues to impose their preferences on an entire state (Jacob, 2001).

And when standards specify detailed content to be taught at each grade, rather than more general outcomes, they become a kind of required curriculum, squeezing out innovation. For example, a social studies teacher in Virginia could

not even consider following the principle of “less is more” advocated by the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Instruction

The concept of standards-based instruction makes sense to me, as it apparently does to most administrators and consultants. However, a recent survey (Barnes, 2002) found that a national sample of fourth and eighth grade teachers “do not accept the premises” of standards-based education (Finn, 2002). The teachers said they thought schools should be child-centered rather than teacher-centered and that learning to learn was more important than specific facts and skills.

This actually may reflect the ambiguity of “standards-based.” Although everyone undoubtedly agrees that teachers should be clear about their purposes and that their practices should be consistent with those purposes, they may not agree what the purposes (standards) should be.

High expectations enforced by tests and accountability

To many politicians and members of the public, “standards-based” means simply that students are required to meet “rigorous” standards. So they applaud familiar practices that combine testing and grading: teach a large body of content, give a test that samples the content, and set an arbitrary “cut score” that determines who will pass and who will fail.

The problem with this version of standards is that brief tests composed of mostly multiple-choice items cannot adequately assess a large number of complex standards, so it obscures the very idea of standards-based instruction. The problem is growing worse now because, with declining revenues, states that had some extended-response items (which are expensive to score) can no longer afford them (Hoff, 2002).

The use of inadequate tests and cut scores is particularly harmful when official policies attribute low scores solely to defects in the schools rather than to community conditions in high-poverty areas. The idea of “low performing schools,” now the focus of so much state and federal activity, is complicated; of course the students in such schools are entitled to a high-quality education and of course such schools can and should be improved.

Nevertheless, as economist Richard Rothstein (2002) writes, “By setting goals that are impossible for schools to fulfill (for example, that they will repair the nation’s inequitable income distribution by giving workforce entrants a more remunerative set of skills, or that they will close the gap in achievement between children from different racial groups and economic classes), we position public schools for inevitable failure.”

A better way

So what should be happening instead? Briefly, adopted standards should be treated as “default,” but not exclusive, aims. Parents should choose among multiple approaches, some of which might have different standards. Each school

should define its special mission and engage in data-based self improvement (NSSE, 1997), setting annual targets and gathering and analyzing evidence of progress. Results on state tests, though not definitive, should be an important part of that evidence. Schools should receive equitable resources and those with large numbers of low-scoring students should get special attention, with targets and strategies for improvement determined by professional judgment.

Meanwhile

The legislators and rule makers who have fashioned today's accountability systems are undoubtedly well intentioned. They believed they had to act because educators were not doing enough. Reasonable practices such as monitoring subgroups in the school population by "disaggregating the data," advocated for years by leaders beginning with Ronald Edmonds (1979), have now been converted to simplistic formulas that will result in huge numbers of "failing schools."

While educators need to keep trying to explain why this version of standards-based education is flawed, we must also continue efforts to implement the real thing. It is the promise of the standards movement, not its perversion, that should give direction to America's schools.

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Counterpoint: Standards are not 'anti-child'

By Doug Reeves

Ron Brandt makes a thoughtful and well-reasoned argument. We share a passion for equity and for the promise that standards-based education, properly implemented, can offer to schools and the students we serve.

I enter this argument knowing that providing a rejoinder to the executive editor emeritus of ASCD is in the same league as offering to give guitar lessons to Eric Clapton. Nevertheless, I must take issue with at least one argument that Brandt repeats, legitimizing a claim that does not grow more accurate with the frequency and volume with which it is repeated.

The alternative to standards, the critics cited by Brandt claim, is education that is "child-centered rather than teacher-centered and that learning to learn was more important than specific facts and skills." This perpetuates the myth that standards are somehow "anti-child," and that successful implementation of standards is tantamount to succumbing to rote memorization and thus excludes thoughtful analysis and reasoning skills.

First, the plain reading of many state standards makes clear that reasoning, analysis and deep thinking are required in order to meet them. If some standards are flawed, then the appropriate remedy is to fix them, not to render them impotent as optional guidelines.

Second, we dare not conflate "child-centered" with "child-popular." Veteran educators routinely have students thank them for their rigor and challenge years after their classroom contact, but few if any receive such thanks from their present students.

Standards, and the rigor they impose, are not designed to be popular, but to open a world of opportunity to students who will have more opportunities in education and in life as a result of their improved literacy, thinking and analytical skills.

Right now, those opportunities are available only to those students who attend schools with high expectations, rigorous standards and exceptional teaching. This should be the birthright of every child in the nation, not the subject of options that are selected predominately by the economically advantaged.

Brandt appears to accept standards only as a suggestion, not as the criteria by which students receive the same expectations of knowledge and skills irrespective of neighborhood or background. While he acknowledges that state tests can play a role in the data to be considered by schools, he ultimately suggests that "each school should define its special mission."

If this freedom takes place within the framework of standards, then we agree. But if schools that are producing students that are demonstrably non-proficient are allowed to use the guise of freedom to perpetuate low expectations, then I am unwilling to grant freedom to those schools that are belligerently indifferent to the needs of students.

A significant minority of schools fall into this category, using the language of "child-centered" to evade rigor and avoid challenge. To these schools, I would not offer Brandt's unbridled choices, but rather the academic standards of their state, however imperfect they may be. Imperfect standards are far better than the perpetuation of low expectations and the elevation of popularity over rigor.

Counterpoint: Don't Blame the Bell Curve

By Ron Brandt

I'm glad to see that Doug Reeves and I are not far apart. I agree with him that accountability should be based on more than a few test scores. And that schools and districts should sift through "voluminous" lists and focus instead on a small number of "power standards" (although state tests tied to all the adopted standards discourage doing so). And as a former Cornhusker, I join in applauding Nebraska's emphasis on teacher judgment and multiple assessments.

What Doug Reeves and I may differ on is not what *ought* to be happening but what actually *is* happening. The issue is not standards versus no standards. It is what the particular standards are and how they are used. The issue is not "absence of standards."

Competent teachers are clearly guided in their work by numerous standards of excellence. And it is entirely appropriate for our profession to attempt to make these standards as explicit as possible. The results of such efforts — though never fully satisfactory — can be very useful.

Carried to extreme, however, as we found three decades ago when thousands of teachers were induced to write, and then try to make use of, endless lists of "behavioral objectives," such undertakings can become counterproductive, especially when they are enforced by government edicts.

Also, contrary to what Doug Reeves says, the alternative to state-adopted standards is not the bell curve; it is assigning grades "on the curve," a practice which experts flatly condemn. For example, in his meticulous review of research on reporting, Guskey (1996) declared, "Grading and reporting should always be done in reference to learning criteria, never 'on the curve.'"

Of course, many teachers ignore that advice. I suspect one reason is that, even with exceptional wisdom and years of experience, it is hard to tell exactly how well students should be able to do on a particular task.

Also, it can be very discouraging for every student in an entire class to get low marks simply because able and advantaged students elsewhere do better work. For these reasons, many teachers, consciously or unconsciously, adjust their expectations to what their students seem capable of doing.

A classic example of this tendency occurred in 1999 in a suburban district near Washington, D.C. At that time, the same annual end-of-course algebra test was administered in all secondary schools, but the results were treated very differently. A score of 66 earned an A in one school but would get a B, C or D in other schools. Teachers explained that circumstances (mainly socioeconomic) made the difference.

Such extreme discrepancies, and educators' defense of them, were, of course, what gave us the standards movement. Doug Reeves has championed that

movement, rightly insisting that students must not be stereotyped as unable, simply because of their race or social class, to learn what they need to know.

"Grading on the curve" is a little different, but equally undesirable. In calling it the bell curve, Reeves is saying that teachers who evaluate their students in comparison with one another are predetermining that — by definition — a few will do well, most will do only moderately well, and some will do poorly.

Unfortunately, the practice is so entrenched that individual teachers may have little choice in the matter. Imagine how administrators in most schools would respond to a teacher who reported a grade distribution radically different from that of the rest of the faculty!

As Reeves says, if teaching is to be standards-based, students must be graded on their mastery of standards, not on how their work compares with that of other students. And for that to happen, the whole system needs to change: organizational routines must be reoriented toward the goal of making all students successful, not sorting them into categories.

The problem, as I said in my earlier article, is that state testing programs function more like classrooms graded on the curve than like standards-based classrooms. What states should do, as Doug Reeves says, is emphasize "power standards" (including their appropriate assessment), rather than reinforce traditional practices.

But that does not mean they would banish the bell curve. The bell curve is simply a representation of the unalterable fact of human differences. As we all know from Ed Psych 101, these differences — in physical attributes, interests, talents ("intelligences"), and so on — are distributed in a recognizable pattern.

I am 60 inches tall, placing me near the middle of the curve for height of adult males. I am a good speller (I won second place in the eighth grade Antelope County spelling contest), which places me far to the right on the spelling curve. But I am abysmal at tasks requiring physical coordination, which puts me far to the left on the dancing continuum. With enough prodding and coaching I might meet minimum standards, but even so, I would never become an outstanding dancer.

So given that the bell curve is here to stay (in other words, that students differ greatly in their backgrounds and capabilities they bring to the learning situation) and that teachers' expectations nevertheless ought not to be unfairly different, what should be done?

Part of the answer is to separate standards from grade levels. Standards in most state documents have been organized by grade levels, partly for the convenience of teachers, most of whom work in graded schools — and partly for the convenience of test makers, administrators and policymakers who want neat scorecards.

But Robert Linn (2000), distinguished authority on testing and accountability, writes, “Having high standards is not the same as having common standards for all, especially when they are tied to a lock-step of age or grade level.”

Today’s caricature of standards-based education is undoubtedly also a response to misguided criticism by politicians of “social promotion.” The truth about that phenomenon is that generations of educators have struggled with the fact of human differences. To deal with it they have invented and tested many different solutions — nongraded schools, multi-age classrooms, the Joplin plan, Individually Prescribed Instruction, Individually Guided Education, mastery learning, and so on — none of which is perfect, but each of which is more effective than retention (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Unfortunately, recent state and national policies ignore these innovations and are based instead on the assumption that all fifth graders should learn the same things at the same time.

As Doug Reeves says, we must have high expectations for all students. However, a sensible approach to achieving these expectations must acknowledge the reality of the bell curve. It must begin, in other words, with appropriate provisions for individual differences.

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