

Too Many Standards? My Four Answers

WELL BEFORE the global pandemic caused a wave of school building closures and consequent learning losses, teachers complained there were too many standards for student learning. The problem was that, however well-intentioned and thoughtfully designed, state standards all suffer from the same faulty assumption: Students need only one year of learning.

That assumption always has been questionable, but after students in 2020 lost at least six months of learning (and many would argue they lost more), teachers in 2021 are facing students who may be two years or more behind their current grade level. The idea of teaching and assessing three years of learning in a single year

is preposterous. Fortunately, some practical solutions are available.

Facing Reality

First, stop the illusion of perfect alignment of curriculum and standards. Curriculum leaders at state and district levels have invested an enormous amount of time in the process of alignment, establishing connections between state standards and the details of curriculum and assessment at each grade level.

However elaborate these documents may be, they do not represent the reality of the classroom in which teachers have a limited amount of time to help students catch up in missing essential skills and assess — and reassess — the academic content of the current year. Rather than the coherence that curriculum alignment was intended to provide, teachers are left to make idiosyncratic choices about what they teach, with little regard to standards and curriculum documents.

Second, focus assessments on the essentials. The folly of most assessments, from end-of-unit tests to the ubiquitous benchmark assessments and end-of-year tests, is that every standard is equally important. A better approach is for districts to embrace what I have called “power standards,” that subset of standards that gives students the knowledge and skills that are most important.

My experience with secondary school math teachers nationwide is that they are dealing with students who lack basic skills in number operations, fractions, decimals and measurement. Data from state tests show chronically low levels of math achievement, yet rather than focus on these essentials, many math teachers ignore student deficiencies in the basics and plow through the required curriculum items on the rhombus and trapezoid.

These teachers need courageous leaders who will tell them to “punt the

rhombus” and focus on the essentials that will help students succeed at the next level of learning.

Stop Accumulation

Third, commit to a “zero-sum” rule on curriculum. For any new curriculum item added, something must be subtracted. For example, some schools are embracing the 1619 Project curriculum based on the work of *The New York Times* surrounding the introduction of slavery in America. While this may be a worthy endeavor, please don’t ask social studies teachers to do this unless you either explicitly remove something else from the curriculum or give them an 11-month school year.

Fourth, recognize there is more to student success than academic content standards. Many students have been traumatized by illnesses and deaths of loved ones and the isolation from friends associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s hard to focus on prepositional phrases, the map of South America and the quadratic equation when you are not physically and emotionally safe.

The process of establishing standards, from the Common Core to those adopted by individual states, is a political one and often a process of accumulation, with different stakeholders demanding that the standards include “what every child should know.” Because there is no constituency favoring a reduction in academic content, it is up to education leaders at the local level — superintendents, curriculum directors and teacher-leaders — to say what we all know to be true: There are too many learning standards. Teachers are depending on you to tell them what’s most important.

DOUGLAS REEVES is director of Creative Leadership Solutions in Boston, Mass., and author of *Achieving Equity and Excellence*. E-mail: douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net. Twitter: @DouglasReeves

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