

## Standards-Based Instruction: A Focused Approach to Teaching and Learning

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What consistently guides your work and informs your instructional decisions? Chances are, your response to this question is “standards.” Of course, there are additional sources that influence you and your work as an educator, but few instructional decisions are made in today’s classrooms without consideration of the standards.

Standards have remained fixed at the center of school reform efforts during the past decade. Simply defined as “what students should know and be able to do,” standards have weathered many storms that threatened to discredit their utility and purpose. Today, standards provide a focus for curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as professional development and dialogue. What emerged from “A Nation at Risk” became developed through “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” and has been implemented in schools nationwide, creating a focused approach to teaching and learning in a standards-based system of education. Today, “No Child Left Behind” seeks to hold educators and students accountable for high-quality standards in education.

Providing a monumental shift in how educators define teaching and learning, standards have replaced or provided support for existing state curriculum frameworks. While those frameworks or core curriculum guides serve to describe what teachers should teach, content standards serve to describe the knowledge and skills demanded of each student. Shifting primary ownership for educational achievement from teachers to students, issues of accountability have raised the stakes for the entire educational community — educators and students alike. This is not to imply that neither teachers were teaching nor students were learning before standards appeared. However, the content, expectations, and accountability for students varied widely between classrooms within and across districts. The challenges to raise student achievement for all students are great, and though reform efforts are far from complete in our nation’s schools, standards have brought about historic change.

The standards movement began as a response to the 1983 U.S. Department of Education’s National Commission on Excellence in Education report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” which cited the failures of America’s education system. In this

alarming report, the commission stated the following:

The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.

The commission recommended that schools adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance. So the development of content and performance standards began.

In 1994, President Clinton signed the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” which called for coherent, nationwide, systemic education reform, including the development and certification of high-quality, internationally competitive content and student performance standards. The term *content standards* became defined as the broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a particular subject area. *Performance standards* were introduced as the *concrete examples* and explicit definitions of what students have to know and be able to do in order to demonstrate proficiency of the content standards. The act also identified the need for opportunity-to-learn standards, which determine the criteria for assessing the quality of the resources, practices, and conditions necessary at each level of the education system (schools, local education agencies, and states) to provide all students with the opportunity to learn the adopted content standards. In other words, educators need more than a set of standards — more than a document stating what students should know and be able to do. We require a coordinated system to support, evaluate, and revise the implementation and effectiveness of standards-based instruction.

Through the development of national voluntary content standards as well as state and local content standards, many educators became engaged in rich discussions about their subject areas, pedagogy, instructional practices and resources, and assessment. While multiple stake holders participated in the actual development of content standards, the processes of adoption and implementation elicited even greater participation from practitioners (Abdal-Haqq, 1995). Initially, many teachers viewed their new content standards with frustration

and doubt since their resources and assessments did not align with these standards. However, since the development and implementation of content standards, textbooks and materials, curriculum maps, and assessments have been developed to align with those standards in order to further support a standards-based system of education. The quality and rate of adoption of these aligned resources varies from district to district and state to state. However, over time, teachers have begun to see the benefits of a coordinated system of curriculum, instruction, and assessment focused on a common set of standards.

In a standards-based system, a common set of content and performance standards provides for alignment not only within, but also between classrooms. Therefore, the content, rigor and expectations for any course are not contingent upon the teacher, school site and/or student population. Course content and expectations for achievement have been made clear among educators, students and parents through standards documents that have been published, posted and shared within and beyond the educational community. Of course, most content standards are subject to interpretation, so they have become a focal point of professional dialogue and development. Teachers now work collaboratively to “unpack” or analyze their standards in efforts to design clear instruction and assessments. Instead of weighing in on what they find interesting and/or personally important to teach, which is sometimes only loosely connected to the framework descriptions, teachers’ comments and contributions have become focused on the standards demanded of all of their students. The insights and expertise of teachers remains an important factor in this process, however decisions are made based upon the commonly held standards available to all teachers. There remains great value in veteran teachers sharing their successful strategies and useful resources so long as they support the teaching and learning of the standards. Similarly, educators have realized that effective professional development focuses on support for standards-based instruction and achievement.

With common standards, common assessments have been developed at numerous school sites and at district levels in order to provide accountability for student achievement. Teacher-developed common assessments often provide for alternative or multiple measures of student achievement. Some districts use common assessments as benchmark indicators that provide formative assessment data on student progress. Additionally, these assessments have generated data that serves to inform teachers of their own progress towards established goals or achievement targets. Using common assessments created from common standards, colleagues

have begun to share instructional materials and practices for improved teaching and learning. Together, they collaborate to interpret standards and assessment data, which then informs their decisions about such issues as curriculum mapping, pacing, reteaching, differentiated instruction, and general progress.

In contrast to a system of education where the content and direction for any given subject was hidden in the lesson plan books of the teachers, and assessment was a mysterious game of “guess what the teacher wants us to learn,” today’s standards-based system of education provides greater and equal access to academic targets and performance expectations. Perhaps this is what the authors of “A Nation at Risk” envisioned when they stated that students should have “the chance to participate fully in our national life.” That national life starts where students are — in school. Perhaps this is what the authors meant by a “shared education,” which they described as “essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.” Standards do not diminish the role, importance or authority of the educator. Standards serve to enhance the value and necessity of each educator.

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